

Peripheral Neuropathy

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Peripheral neuropathy is a term used to describe disorders resulting from injury to the peripheral nerves. Peripheral nerves are those that connect the Central Nervous System to the muscles, skin and internal organs. There can be many causes for the illness, and they include: immune system problems; nerve tumors; drugs; infections; kidney disease; poor diet; alcohol abuse and nerve compression (carpal tunnel syndrome).

Many Multiple Myeloma (MM) patients are affected by peripheral neuropathy. It is a side effect of some drugs used to fight MM. For instance, it is estimated that up to one third of patients taking Thalidomide will experience peripheral neuropathy. Sensations include numbness, tingling and pain in the feet or hands, weakness in the arms or legs, unsteadiness while walking, and the feeling that you are wearing gloves and stockings when you are not.

Treatment depends on the cause. For MM patients with thalidomide induced neuropathy, this can mean: a reduction in the dosage of thalidomide; a change of treatment; spaced dosages; pain medicines; anodyne therapy; surgery; vitamin and mineral supplement “cocktails,” or a combination of these possible remedies. Unfortunately for the patient, none of these is a “cure,” but they may relieve distress. For those patients having success with thalidomide but who suffer from neuropathy, their dilemma may be whether to continue on the drug and endure neuropathy rather than moving to a more dramatic treatment.

One of the striking things about neuropathy is how little research is being done. It is a disease that has an estimated 20 million sufferers in the United States, large numbers of whom are diabetics. It is estimated that 10% of diabetics are afflicted. The disease occurs in numerous forms, and this may be part of the reason it is somewhat neglected in the research arena. It is referred to as “The most common disease you never heard of.”

The Neuropathy Association is one of the principal patient advocates. Their membership fee is a very modest \$35 and they publish a newsletter. They are based in New York City and for further information; you can contact them at 212-692-0662, www.neuropathy.org or by E-mail at info@neuropathy.org .