

There's hope for managing neuropathy

Between 10 and 20 million Americans suffer from neuropathy, experiencing seemingly causeless sensations of tingling, numbness, heat, cold, and even stabbing pain," observes Hal M. Tobias, MD, of Neurology Associates of the Treasure Coast, "yet the Neuropathy Association estimates that only 7 percent of Americans have even heard of this sometimes debilitating condition.

"Consequently, many patients don't even realize that their phantom sensations are symptoms of a recognized medical condition. They fail to seek help, suffering needlessly while their condition deteriorates and their symptoms intensify."

Neuropathy may include the sensations just described, as well as sudden, involuntary movements of the extremities, weakness in the arms or legs, and lack of coordination or sensation or both. It is a neurologic condition and as such will be most effectively addressed by a neurologist who can perform a work-up that will provide valuable insights about the condition of the patient's central and peripheral nervous systems. This work-up can identify treatable medical conditions, which, when addressed, may result in significant relief from the painful and sometimes debilitating effects of neuropathy.

Dr. Tobias advises patients to select a neurologist who is also well versed in pain management techniques, because fully 30% of patients suffering from neuropathy demonstrate no identifiable cause for their discomfort.

Another 30% of cases can be traced to nerve damage that results from diabetes. Neuropathic symptoms may also result from trauma, infections, metabolic abnormalities, autoimmune disease, tumors, heredity, nutritional deficiencies, compressed nerves, and drugs or toxins.

Dr. Tobias is board certified in both neurology and pain medicine, so if the underlying cause of a patient's neuropathy can not be identified and treated, Dr. Tobias can quickly turn his efforts to relieving that patient's discomfort.

What to know and to expect

Patients of all ages can develop neuropathy, but it occurs more frequently with age.

Neuropathy results from damage to the peripheral nervous system, the system of sensory, motor, and autonomic (organ) nerves that branch off from the central nervous system comprising the brain and spinal cord.

Most cases of neuropathy involve all three types of nerves, although patients may only be aware of one or two, even as the condition advances.

Depending on which nerves are affected, the symptoms of neuropathy can appear suddenly or may increase gradually over a period of years. Early indications are persistent numbness or weakness and unexplained pain.

Some people experience only infrequent phantom sensations, like the feeling that a bare foot or hand is encased in a soft sock or glove. Others experience symptoms like tingling or stabbing so pronounced that these sensations interfere with daily activities. In extreme cases, the effects of neuropathy can be disabling and even fatal, if they affect the function of the organs.

Damaged *sensory nerves* can generate a variety of symptoms.

They often begin with sporadic, spontaneous sensations of electric shock, numbness or tingling, heat or cold, and stabbing. These sensations are usually more frequent and pronounced at night and can quickly become painful. Abnormal and unpleasant sensations can be triggered by a touch, or the patient may experience a lessening or lack of sensation in the affected area.

Sensory nerves also may give an inaccurate perception of body position. Patients may find themselves unsteady or uncoordinated while walking because they can't accurately gauge the placement of their feet. Their sensory misperceptions may cause them to walk with a widened gait to maintain balance or to drag their feet while walking to maintain awareness of positioning.

When the *autonomic nerves* are damaged, patients may feel light-headed if they rise too quickly from their seats, and some patients eventually find that other symptoms like constipation, diarrhea, and sexual dysfunction are caused by neuropathy.

Patients whose *motor nerves* are compromised may have difficulty walking or running. Their arms and legs may feel heavy or weighted down, and they may notice that it takes unusual effort to accomplish such simple tasks and climbing stairs or carrying groceries. Muscle spasms and cramps may be common. Fine motor skills like opening jars, turning doorknobs, or attending to personal grooming may become difficult, and patients may notice a tendency to drop things more frequently.

Dr. Tobias urges anyone who experiences these symptoms to seek the advice of a skilled neurologist and pain specialist.

Neurology Associates
of the Treasure Coast
Hal M. Tobias, MD

Neuropathy can cause a variety of symptoms, ranging from seemingly causeless tingling and numbness to muscle weakness, imbalance, and lack of fine motor skills.

Keep this in mind

Balance problems caused by neuropathy are particularly dangerous for older patients, points out Dr. Tobias.

Here's why, according to a study released by the Southern Illinois University School of Medicine:

- Falls are the leading cause of injury and death among those over age 65.
- 35% of individuals over age 65 fall at least once a year.
- 50% of individuals over age 80 fall at least once a year.
- 50% of those who fall will do so more than once.
- 50% of individuals over age 75 who fall will not survive another year.

"As people age, it's not uncommon to find themselves suddenly experiencing balance problems," observes Dr. Tobias. "They tell themselves, *Oh, I'm just getting older. It's only to be expected.* Well, they're wrong!"

"Such changes can be indicative of neuropathy, and they warrant an immediate call to their neurologist to evaluate the reason for the imbalance.

"Whatever a patient's age, the key to managing neuropathy successfully is to manage it early," emphasizes Dr. Tobias. "In many cases, neuropathy is not diagnosed until it is far advanced and has already caused significant, sometimes irreversible, damage. I invite anyone experiencing the unexplained and annoying sensations of neuropathy to contact my office for a consultation.

"There is help." **FHCN**—Billie S. Noakes

Gaining on pain ...

Dr. Tobias welcomes your questions regarding this article or any issues involving pain management and neurological disorders. To schedule an appointment, please call **(772) 283-3414**. Neurology Associates of the Treasure Coast is located at **901 SE Monterey Commons Blvd., Suite 200**, in Stuart.

RELENTLESS BACK PAIN? CONSIDER VAX-D!

Ongoing, unrelieved pain has a considerable impact on people's lives," acknowledges Dr. Tobias.

For those who suffer the pain-generating nerve damage resulting from impingements by the vertebrae and spinal discs, Dr. Tobias offers several powerful tool for relief.

One of these is vertebral axial decompression, or VAX-D, a noninvasive medical procedure that relieves pressure on the lumbar discs.

During treatment, the patient lies on a comfortable, computer-controlled table. The movement of the table creates an axial force, which effectively relieves pressure in the lumbar region.

"Seven out of ten people won't need lumbar surgery after having VAX-D treatment," says Dr. Tobias, "and many people who have undergone surgery to treat bulging discs or sciatica could likely have received better treatment with VAX-D."