

Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) Treatments for Peripheral Neuropathy (PN) (Last Updated august 20, 2015)

Most peripheral neuropathy (PN) treatments are centered on pain reduction and improvement in function. Effective treatment for injured nerves often requires a combination of medicines, exercise and other therapies. It can take some time to find the combination that is right for you. Mild pain may respond to a simple over-the-counter (OTC) drug, like ibuprofen or acetaminophen. Or your provider may prescribe one or more medications for you. More commonly used medicines include neuropathic pain agents, most often anti-seizure medications or certain anti-depressants. Consult your provider to learn what is right for you.

Should you suffer from Diabetic Peripheral Neuropathy (DPN) the most important thing you can do is to manage your blood glucose level which can prevent further nerve damage. Managing your diabetes plays a critical role in treating DPN, so keep your blood sugar levels in normal range with frequent testing, proper diet, exercise, medications and/or insulin therapy.

In addition to working with your providers, the Neuropathy Action Foundation (NAF) has found that some patients find relief by exploring the treatments listed below. Many patients find that an integrative approach – one that uses both conventional methods and Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) therapies – is the best way to manage their pain and discomfort. Therefore, this brochure was created by the NAF based on what we have heard from patients since the NAF was created in 2006. Since some CAM therapies, particularly nutritional supplements, interact with certain prescription drugs or may not be appropriate for use by some patients, it is very important to consult with your medical provider before starting a new CAM treatment.

NOTE: This brochure is for educational purposes and not for the purpose of rendering medical advice. Information in this brochure is not intended to replace the counsel of your provider. It is important to consult your provider before altering your treatment plan. Information provided does not imply medical recommendation or endorsement. The NAF does not endorse any medications, products, equipment or treatments.

Absorbine Jr.® – This product is applied directly on the pain area typically at bedtime. It is a formulation of menthol combined with natural herb extracts. It is available in most drug stores.

Acupuncture/Acupressure – Acupuncture is a method of encouraging the body to function. This is done by inserting needles and applying heat or electrical stimulation at very precise acupuncture points.

Alpha Lipoic Acid (ALA) – ALA, found in all cells of the body, is a vitamin-like chemical called an antioxidant. Yeast, liver, kidney, spinach, broccoli, and potatoes contain small amounts of ALA. It is also made in the laboratory and has been used since the 1950's as a dietary

supplement. ALA is approved in Germany for the treatment of DPN. ALA seems to help prevent certain kinds of cell damage in the body. There is evidence that ALA can improve the function and conduction of neurons in diabetes, may help with regrowth of damaged nerves and may help limit and treat neuropathy caused by chemotherapy. It is sold in drug stores.

Analgesic Creams, Rubs, and Sprays - Topical pain killers, or analgesics, are sprayed on or rubbed into the skin over painful muscles or joints. Although all are designed to relieve pain, different products use different ingredients. Here are the most common ingredients found in products available without a prescription.

- **Counterirritants.** Ingredients such as menthol, methylsalicylate (oil of wintergreen), and camphor are called counterirritants because they create a burning or cooling sensation that distracts your mind from the pain.
- **Salicylates.** These same ingredients that give aspirin its pain-relieving quality are found in some creams. When absorbed into the skin, they may help with pain, particularly in joints close to the skin, such as the fingers, knees, and elbows.
- **Capsaicin Cream.** The main ingredient of hot chili peppers, capsaicin is also one of the most effective ingredients for topical pain relief. When first applied, capsaicin creams cause a warm tingling or burning sensation. This gets better over time. You may need to apply these creams for a few days up to a couple of weeks before you notice relief.

Aquatic Aerobic Exercise - Water supports your body so your muscles are developed without jarring. Exercise programs can be found in gyms with pools or in therapy pools supervised by physical therapists.

B Vitamins - Patients with peripheral neuropathy may be deficient in B-complex vitamins. Many patients have told us over the years that taking B12 daily has helped them. Also, benfotiamine, a fat-soluble, highly absorbable form of thiamine (vitamin B1) might reduce diabetic pain and improve nerve conduction velocity. It is important not to take more than the recommended amount of vitamin B6 daily, as this can actually cause neuropathy.

Bed Cradle – Supportive treatments like a bed cradle that can keep sheets and blankets from touching sensitive feet and legs have been shown to help many patients over the years.

Biofeedback - Biofeedback is a technique that trains people to improve their health by controlling certain bodily processes that normally happen involuntarily, such as heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension, and skin temperature. Patches, called electrodes, are placed on different parts of your body to measure your heart rate, blood pressure, or other function. A monitor is used to display the results. With help from a biofeedback therapist, they will describe a situation and guide you through relaxation techniques. The monitor lets you see how your heart rate and blood pressure change in response to being stressed or remaining relaxed. Initially, you will use the monitor to see your progress, but eventually you will be able to achieve success without a monitor or electrodes. Biofeedback is primarily used to treat high blood pressure, tension headache, migraine headache, chronic pain, and urinary incontinence.

CoQ10 – Also known as ubiquinone or ubiquinol. CoQ10 is an antioxidant that is essential for nerve health. Taken as a nutritional supplement, it has been shown to decrease signs of neuropathy caused by diabetes and chemotherapy, and in some cases, to help with regrowth of damaged nerves. CoQ10 is available without a prescription at drug stores.

Compounded Pharmacy Medications – Many traditionally prescribed oral medications for neuropathy have side effects and OTC products may not be helpful enough. Therefore, some patients are taking advantage of specially created medications that combine the active analgesic benefits of various products with nerve health supplement ingredients into creams, gels, patches, etc. Traditional pharmacists are not in a position to create such products, but Compounding Pharmacists can work with your doctors to create medication alternatives for you.

Diet – Making the right choices in your diet will make a huge difference in your overall health! Limit your refined carbs and sugary drinks; choose water over soda, and drink skim milk instead of whole milk. Choose baked or broiled foods over fried, and limit your sodium intake. You are what you eat, but when you eat is just as important when managing diabetes. Keep regular meal and snack times to keep your blood sugar levels constant. Also watch your size portions.

Ergonomics and Splints – Can be helpful for people suffering from muscle weakness as the result of PN. Also, making ergonomic changes to one's workplace may reduce the symptoms of carpal tunnel and help alleviate the pain from peripheral neuropathy.

Evening Primrose Oil – Evening primrose oil is the oil from the seed of the evening primrose plant, and is one of the main sources of the essential fatty acid “gamma-linolenic acid” (GLA). Some people use evening primrose oil for nerve damage related to diabetes. Studies have found that GLA may help reduce symptoms of diabetic neuropathy.

Exercise Classes – Low impact exercise classes can be helpful in strengthening weakened muscles, helping restore better balance, relieving pain and depression through the release of endorphins. It is important that those who suffer from PN keep moving to maximize potentials for wellness and minimize our propensity for weakness.

Feldenkrais® – A form of physical therapy that uses gentle movement and directed attention to improve movement and enhance human functioning. Some say this technique helped them increase their ease and range of motion, flexibility and coordination. Feldenkrais teaches that increasing a person's kinesthetic self-awareness of functional movement could lead to increased function, reduced pain, and greater ease and pleasure of movement.

Ice Pack – May relieve pain, swelling and inflammation from injuries and conditions such as PN.

Icy Hot® – For some people, this over-the-counter topical ointment cools down the hot feet and/or warms up cold feet. It may also help with muscle and joint pain.

Infrared Light Therapy – Available from a variety of providers, this therapy uses infrared light. It is purported to increase circulation and reduce pain. It is available through podiatrists, chiropractors, and other medical practitioners, as well as machines available for home use.

Ivory® Soap – While some dismiss this product for PN as an urban myth or quackery nonsense, some people are finding that placing a bar of Ivory between the sheets at the foot of the bed actually reduces their night time PN feet distress. (Some have used other soaps.)

Lidocaine Patches – These are commonly used for severe pain using very high powered pain medications and are available only by prescription. There are also a number of over-the-counter pain patches for lesser levels of pain and containing non-narcotic ingredients.

Massage - Massage or massage therapy is a system of structured palpations or movements of the soft tissues of the body. The massage system may include, but is not limited to, such techniques as, stroking, kneading, gliding, percussion, friction, vibration, compression, passive or active stretching within the normal anatomical range of movement. It is increasingly being offered along with standard treatment for a wide range of medical conditions and situations.

Meditation - Meditation is one of the most widely used forms of complementary therapy, particularly as a palliative for chronic illness. Available meditation research is generally of low-to-modest quality, but tends to support this intervention for the reduction of stress and pain, and improving quality of life in a variety of medical conditions.

Neuragen® – Neuragen is a topical product that works directly at the site of the pain. Neuragen claims to reduce the spontaneous firing of damaged peripheral nerves. By calming these firings at the source, Neuragen has been reported to reduce shooting and burning pains quickly and without the side effects of oral medications. Some patients who have used Neuragen have reported sleeping better and being able to walk without pain. Neuragen is a homeopathic pain reliever and may be used alone or in with other medications. It is available over the counter in most local pharmacies either in the diabetic section or the analgesic (pain) section.

Nikken® – Magnetic, infrared, and other therapeutic products including creams and vitamin supplements. The magnetic insoles have been helpful for some who find walking difficult.

Peppermint Lotion – Cooling and soothing for neuropathic distress. The often used Dr. Scholl's Peppermint Foot & Leg Lotion version is available at most pharmacies.

Physical Therapy – A variety of physical therapies can be helpful for some neuropathy conditions, particularly in relation to restoring balance, increasing lost muscle strength, and relieving neuro-muscular disorder pain and distress.

Reflexology – Reflexology is an alternative medicine (therapy) involving application of pressure to the feet and hands with specific thumb, finger, and hand techniques without the use of oil or lotion. It is based on a system of zones and reflex areas that reflect an image of the body on the feet and hands, with the premise that such work effects a physical change to the body.

Reiki – Reiki is a Japanese technique for stress reduction and relaxation that also promotes healing. It is administered by "laying on hands" and is based on the idea that an unseen "life force energy" flows through us and is what causes us to be alive.

Shoes – Orthopedic inserts and specially designed shoes have been reported to help many who suffer from PN. Find a good shoe store that will consult with you and fit you well. If you are wearing an orthotic, be sure to take it with you to be sure it fits well in your shoe choice. Properly fitting shoes are essential for those with neuropathic distress in their feet and/or with leg and back pain problems. Wear shoes/slippers to protect your feet, even when you are at home. Many insurance programs, including Medicare, can help cover the costs.

Sore No More® - A pain-relieving gel that begins to work immediately once massaged onto affected area. Claims to have unique heating and cooling ingredients made from a special blend of natural plant extracts in combination with menthol, capsaicin and witch hazel.

Tai Chi – Tai Chi is a Chinese martial art practiced for both its defense training and its health benefits. Many believe that Tai Chi helps with fall prevention, general healthcare in older people, improving balance and enhancing psychological health. This simple movement exercise is favored by many with PN as it helps to develop and maintain proper balance.

Transcutaneous Electronic Nerve Stimulation (TENS) - TENS is a method of therapy that may be used to treat nerve pain. It works by inhibiting pain signals from reaching the brain. It is a drug-free therapy that works by placing very small electrical impulses on specific nerve paths. The electrical impulses are delivered to the nerves through electrodes that are placed on the skin. Although it doesn't work for everyone or all types of pain, TENS may be prescribed in combination with other treatments, primarily to provide relief from acute forms of nerve pain.

Tonic Water – Through the concentration of the active ingredient, quinine, some say this helps with leg cramps/muscle spasms. If you are prone to cramping, you might consider trying a ¼ or ½ cup of tonic water each evening. For refractory muscle cramps, prescription quinine sulfate may be an option.

Vicks Vapor Rub® – Massaging one's feet with Vicks, particularly at night, soothes neuropathic pain and distress in one's feet and legs. It is also excellent for softening your toe nails and diminishing common toe nail problems.

Warm/Cool Baths and Showers - Excellent de-stressors and can help with reducing pain.

Water – Drinking plenty of water is essential to maintain good health. Drink 6-8 ounce glasses of water per day; if that is hard, incorporate foods with high water contents, like soup or fruits (fresh, frozen or canned in light syrup) into your meals.

Weight Loss – Achieving and maintaining a healthy weight can help relieve numerous chronic health problems. Blood sugar levels are better controlled after weight loss which is important for managing DPN. Additionally, one will have more energy for exercise, and depressive states will be more easily overcome.

Yoga – There are many types and styles of yoga from very mild movements, stretches and poses to very active, demanding exertion. Deep breathing and contemplative relaxation stillness are integral components of yoga practice. Gentle and chair yoga are most recommended.