

Peripheral Neuropathy Pain

Condition: Peripheral neuropathy refers to damage to the nerves in the peripheral nervous system, most commonly the arms and legs. These are the nerves that transmit messages between the central nervous system (the brain and spinal cord) and the rest of the body.

Background: Approximately 20 million Americans have peripheral neuropathy. It can be inherited, develop as a result of a disease or happen after an injury or exposure to a toxin. In many cases, though, a specific cause cannot be found.

Risk Factors: There are multiple risk factors such as: having a chronic disease, an injury; abusing alcohol; performing repetitive motions; having an infection, and exposure to toxins. People with diabetes have the highest risk of peripheral neuropathy.

History and Symptoms: To better understand this condition, it helps to understand how the peripheral nerves work. For instance, they can route messages regarding sensation *to* the brain and spinal cord, such as a message that the hands are cold. They also route messages *from* the brain and spinal cord to the muscles, instructing them to move. People with peripheral neuropathy can experience a variety of symptoms, like pain, weakness, tingling, pricking sensations and numbness, often in the hands and feet. This commonly occurs in a pattern known as stocking- glove distribution.

Physical Exam: Physicians will usually examine the patient's muscle strength and reflexes, as well as his or her ability to sense vibrations, light touch, position and temperature. They may also evaluate posture and gait.

Diagnostic Process: Physicians may order blood tests, CT or MRI scans, nerve function tests and nerve or skin biopsies to diagnose peripheral neuropathy and determine its cause.

Rehab Management: Once the underlying cause is identified, the first step is to see if it can be removed or mitigated. If it can't, medications for neuropathic pain are available. A physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R) physician may also prescribe physical therapy to improve balance, orthotics to protect the feet from skin problems, occupational therapy to compensate for loss of hand function or assistive devices to insure safe mobility.

Other Resources for Patients and Families: [The Foundation for Peripheral Neuropathy](http://www.foundationforperipheralneuropathy.org) can help. They are the leading national nonprofit organization providing peripheral neuropathy patient support and education

Frequently Asked Questions

What is PM&R?

Physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R), also known as physiatry, is a primary medical specialty that aims to enhance and restore functional ability and improve quality of life to those with injuries, physical impairments or disabilities affecting the brain, spinal cord, nerves, bones, joints, ligaments, muscles and tendons. PM&R physicians, known as physiatrists, evaluate and treat the whole body, maximize patients' independence in their daily life and are experts in designing comprehensive, patient-centered treatment plans to empower patients to achieve their goals. By taking the whole body into account, they can accurately pin-point problems, decrease pain, assist in recovery from devastating injuries and maximize overall outcomes and performance with non-surgical and peri-surgical options. To learn more, visit www.aapmr.org/aboutpmr.

What makes PM&R physicians unique?

PM&R physicians' training focuses not just on treating medical conditions, but on enhancing the patient's performance and quality of life in the context of those medical conditions. They focus not only on one part of the body, but instead on the development of a comprehensive program for putting the pieces of a person's life back together – medically, socially, emotionally and vocationally – after injury or disease. PM&R physicians make and manage medical diagnoses, design a treatment plan and prescribe the therapies that physical therapists or other allied therapists perform or that are carried out by the patients themselves. By providing an appropriate treatment plan, PM&R physicians help patients stay as active as possible at any age. Their broad medical expertise allows them to treat disabling conditions throughout a person's lifetime.

Why see a PM&R physician?

A PM&R physician will thoroughly assess your condition, needs, and expectations and rule out any serious medical illnesses to develop a treatment plan. By understanding your condition and goals, you and your PM&R physician can develop a treatment plan suited to your unique needs.

How do I find a PM&R physician near me?

Visit www.aapmr.org/findapmrphysician or contact your primary care physician for a referral.