

What is Breast Cancer-Related Neuropathy?

Facts for people who have had breast cancer and those who care for them



It's strange that although I can't feel my feet, I can feel the pain.



Many people who have had breast cancer experience pain or discomfort caused by damage to the nerves, known as neuropathy. Nerves control our sense of touch, how we feel pain and temperature, and our muscle strength. Nerve damage can impact our quality of life after cancer.

Neuropathy is different for each person. It depends on which nerves and how many are damaged. It can start during cancer treatment or shortly after. Nerve problems may stop or get worse after treatment.

Neuropathy symptoms can include:

- Numbness, tightness, and tingling
- Burning, shooting, or stabbing pain
- Weakness and loss of balance
- A change in sensitivity to touch or temperature

Paula is a [Pathways breast cancer survivorship study](#) participant who never had pain or neuropathy; "I always wondered why they asked me about pain when I went in for my visits." Another study member said that her fingers and toes were tingly and sometimes painful, but "not so much that I couldn't continue on with my normal routine." Sue and Linda, however, have fairly severe nerve problems that have lasted for years.

Most often neuropathy affects the hands, arms, feet, and legs. For both Sue and Linda, feet are most affected and it's worse at night.

zero
breast cancer



For Sue, on the nights when it flares up, it is difficult to sleep. “I can’t stand anything on my feet,” she said. “It’s strange that although I can’t feel my feet, I can feel the pain.”

For Linda, the numbness and dull, aching pain has gotten worse over time, which limits what she can do. Sue had an electrical shock feeling in her feet and hands that would go into her legs and arms. Because of the neuropathy, she can’t drive or ski now. She said, “It was tougher giving up things I can no longer do than it was finding out I had cancer.”

Who gets neuropathy?

Chemotherapy is the most common cause of neuropathy in breast cancer patients. Doctors adjust treatments to reduce side effects like neuropathy and maintain quality of life. Advanced breast cancer, surgery, radiation, and newer immunotherapies can also damage nerves.

“

It was tougher giving up things I can no longer do than it was finding out I had cancer.

Researchers are continuing to investigate who is most likely to have severe and lasting nerve problems. So far, we know that neuropathy is more likely to last for two or more years in patients who are older, have had a mastectomy, are overweight or obese, had more lymph nodes with cancer cells, have a relative with neuropathy, or already had neuropathy or a related condition like diabetes.

Treatment for Neuropathy

Nerve problems can be addressed in several ways and what works varies by person.

- **Medications**, like anti-inflammatories, painkillers, or antidepressants, and topical pain-relief creams or patches
- **Physical therapy or exercise programs** designed for people with neuropathic pain and balance problems
- **Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS)**
- **Acupuncture and massage**
- **Deep breathing and mindfulness**
- **A healthy diet**
- **Avoiding alcohol and tobacco smoking/vaping**

Sue's care team tried different medications to find the combination that works for her. Linda found that painkillers didn't help her. Sue found that she could modify her old activities. For her, a step-through bike gave her a better sense of control than walking. She isn't comfortable riding on streets and can't go as far as she used to on a mountain bike. Still, she says, "It makes me feel alive! To get out and do this is wonderful."

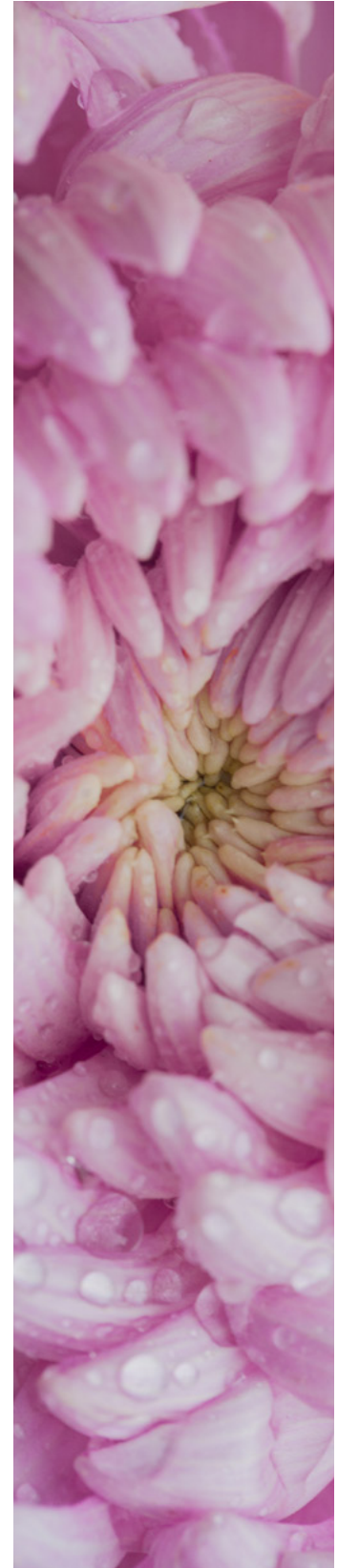
In the beginning, Sue said she would put her feet "in a tub of iced cold water to help relieve some of the pain." While massage brings relief to some, being touched was too painful for her.

Yoga made Maria feel better. Many exercises that can help with nerve symptoms are available online, including stretching, deep breathing, mindfulness, meditation, balancing, self-massage, qi gong, tai chi, and yoga. Low impact exercise, like biking, swimming, or gentle walking, may help. Check with your health care provider about your condition to be sure you can safely do a new activity.

Coping with nerve problems

Keeping safe is critical for people with neuropathy. Lack of feeling increases the risk for burns in bathing, cleaning, and cooking. Researchers have also found that people with neuropathy have a greater risk for bad falls. Wearing shoes or slippers will protect our feet and a cane or walker helps with balance. Check for more tips on managing neuropathy [here](#).

For Linda, it is hard to predict when the pain or numbness will hit her. "I have to be careful how far I walk or how long I stand."





While it doesn't take the pain away, "I meditate every day for stress and relaxation and keep my mind focused on good things." Spirituality and spending time in nature help Maria with her pain.

In the beginning, Sue had trouble with many daily tasks and walking, even with a cane, was difficult. Now she is doing better and rarely uses a cane. "I've learned to cope with the help of the medications; it's been 7 years. It is still more painful at night. I do things that need to be done in the morning and take it easy in the later afternoon."

Having help can also be critical. Sue's sister who has neuropathy and a friend who is a nurse have been great resources for her. "It takes a lot of people to get your life back on track as best that you can."

We each must find what works for us. If you have nerve problems, talk to your health care provider about your symptoms, especially if they are severe or affect your daily life.



Zero Breast Cancer is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization based in San Rafael, CA.

We envision a world with zero breast cancer.

Learn more at zbclink.org/Factsheets
or contact us at info@zerobreastcancer.org

This factsheet was developed in collaboration with breast cancer survivors and Kaiser Permanente scientists.



If you would like to support our work, including developing additional resources for breast cancer survivors, please consider donating at zerobreastcancer.org/donate.