

# Neuropathy

Neuropathy is one of the long term complications of diabetes. Neuropathy means nerve damage. Most commonly nerve damage affects the feet but sometimes the nerves that go to internal organs are damaged. The organs that can be damaged include the bladder, stomach, heart and sex organs. Although there is no cure there are ways that the risks and/or symptoms can be reduced.

## What causes nerve damage?

High blood glucose over long periods of time can damage the blood vessels that carry oxygen and nutrients to the nerves. In turn this affects the nerves ability to transmit signals. Neuropathy is more common in people who have had diabetes for a long time. Having high blood glucose levels also increases the risk of nerve damage.

The nerves of the body are part of a wonderful and complex information system that is a bit like a very large telephone exchange. Messages sent by one part of the body are carried by nerve fibres to the spinal cord in the backbone and finally to the brain where they are interpreted. If nerves supplying the heart, stomach or sex organs are damaged then the function of that organ can be affected.

## How do I know if I have nerve damage?

Symptoms vary and some people do not have any symptoms. Different functions that may be affected are:

- > bladder – you may have difficulty knowing when the bladder is full or difficulty controlling it (eg incontinence).
- > male sexual organs – you may experience erectile dysfunction (unable to achieve erection).
- > stomach and digestion – you may experience indigestion, excessive belching, nausea or vomiting. You may also experience alternating constipation and diarrhoea.
- > heart and blood pressure – blood pressure may drop when you stand quickly causing dizziness or light headedness. You may not feel the pain from a heart attack so report any unusual shortness of breath to your doctor.
- > sweating – if the nerves controlling sweating are damaged the body may find it hard to regulate temperate, or you may have unexpected sweating at night or while eating.
- > loss of hypoglycaemia (low blood glucose) warning signs - nerve damage can make it hard for the body to respond to and recognise low blood glucose.
- > skin – if you have damage to the nerves that supply your feet or hands then you may be less able to feel heat, cold or pain. You may have tingling, pain or numbness in the hands, legs or feet.



## How can I prevent damage to the nerves?

- > maintain blood glucose levels within the target range
- > exercise regularly
- > follow a healthy eating plan
- > maintain a healthy weight
- > don't smoke
- > limit your alcohol intake
- > keep cholesterol and blood pressure within target ranges
- > see your doctor if you develop any signs of neuropathy such as tingling, numbness or pain in the feet.

## What else can be done?

Your treatment will depend on which organ has been affected. Discuss symptoms with your doctor or diabetes educator as there may be specific treatment available. For example:

- > bladder – a full assessment will be carried out to decide if medications or other treatment are needed
- > erectile dysfunction – certain medications or mechanical/implanted devices can be used to assist with achieving and maintaining erections
- > stomach and digestion - small, frequent meals, less non-soluble fibre (eg whole grains, wholemeal cereal / bread, some fruit, legumes) and avoiding fats may help with stomach or digestion problems. You may need to consult a dietitian specialising in diabetes for further information
- > heart and blood pressure – sometimes support stockings can help with blood pressure. Put on in the morning before you get out of bed
- > do not put cream between your toes
- > loss of hypoglycaemia (low blood glucose) warning signs - if you are no longer able to recognise that you are having a 'hypo' you may need your diabetes treatment reassessed and you will be advised to check blood glucose levels more frequently
- > skin – if you have neuropathy affecting your feet you will need information about protecting them from injury. You will need to check you feet everyday. For more information refer to the 'Foot care for high risk feet' factsheet [www.diabetesoutreach.org.au/consumer](http://www.diabetesoutreach.org.au/consumer).

## Key points to remember

- > keep blood glucose levels as close to target as possible
- > discuss any unusual symptoms with your doctor even if they seem minor.

## Where can I go for more information?

Diabetes Outreach  
Diabetes Australia  
Better Health Channel  
Impotence Australia  
HealthInsite

[www.diabetesoutreach.org.au/consumer](http://www.diabetesoutreach.org.au/consumer)  
[www.diabetesaustralia.com.au](http://www.diabetesaustralia.com.au)  
[www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)  
[www.impotenceaustralia.com.au](http://www.impotenceaustralia.com.au)  
[www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

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## For more information

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