

Herbal Remedies for Peripheral Neuropathy

Peripheral neuropathy is a disorder of the peripheral nerves that initially affects the feet and hands, and then progresses up the limbs. Symptoms can include redness, swelling, pain, numbness, and a “pins and needles” tingling sensation.

There are numerous causes of peripheral neuropathy: heredity, diabetes, hypothyroid, arthritis, HIV, cancer, alcohol and heavy metals such as lead, mercury, and arsenic. Medications can also cause the condition, including ddl, and d4T. Nutritional deficiencies seem to worsen the symptoms. Viral infections can directly attack the nervous system or can indirectly stimulate the immune system’s formation of antibodies, leading to destruction to the myelin sheath, the membrane surrounding the nerves. To some extent, the nervous system can regenerate itself after damage has occurred. Remyelination can occur from stem cells that have the ability to differentiate into myelin-making cells, and from healthy cells that can still produce myelin.

A number of supplements can help alleviate symptoms of peripheral neuropathy. Vitamin D is an immune system regulator and powerful antioxidant used to prevent destruction of the myelin sheath. B vitamins are essential for brain function and a healthy nervous system. Vitamin B6 reduces the formation of prostaglandin 2, which contributes to inflammation in the body. Vitamin B12 plays a role in the formation and maintenance of the myelin membrane; a deficiency of this vitamin interferes with the myelin’s ability to repair itself and, over the long-term, can contribute to its destruction. Vitamin C complex is also an excellent addition to a supplement regimen since it is water soluble, and therefore is not stored as a reserve in the body.

Among herbs, nerve tonics such as Skullcap (*Scutellaria lateriflora*), Cramp bark (*Viburnum opulus*) and Oat seed (*Avena sativa*) can be used to treat muscle weakness, nerve damage, and numbness. St. John’s Wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) can either be massaged topically or taken internally for its antiviral and nervous system tonic properties.

Fish oil, a source of essential fatty acids, can also be used to treat peripheral neuropathy. Up to 75 percent of the myelin is composed of fat. However, it is important that the body receives the proper amount of good fats (thin light oils). Look for fish oil that is high in docahexaenoic acid (DHA); one of the thinnest oils in the body, DHA lines the nervous system and is used for rapid message relay. Avoid deep fried foods, animal and trans fats, hydrogenated oils and saturated fats—these are the heavy fats that compete with thinner oils for placement in the myelin sheath and effectively slow down message relay.

Eat a diet high in fruit, vegetables, and fresh fish. Avoid high intake of meat, caffeine, sugar, and artificial sweeteners, such as aspartame. Aspartame, contained in NutraSweet and Equal, has been linked to degenerative nervous system conditions. When ingested, it breaks down into formaldehyde, a known carcinogen, and other toxic chemicals. Regular use can lead to headaches, numbness, slurred speech, dizziness, memory loss, muscle spasms, and joint pain. Continued use of Aspartame can aggravate neurological conditions, including chronic fatigue, multiple sclerosis, and parkinson’s disease.

Although vitamins, supplements, and diet can help alleviate some of the symptoms associated with peripheral neuropathy, it is best to treat chronic conditions in a clinic environment where a practitioner takes into account the whole body and designs a program specific to an individual’s needs.

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