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Peripheral Neuropathy: A Holistic Perspective

by Nancy Sheehan

Peripheral neuropathy is the medical term used to describe the sensations of numbness or pain felt in the hands and feet as a result of nerve damage. This nerve damage may result from injury (including surgery); metabolic disorders such as diabetes; infections; and exposure to toxins such as radiation therapy, pesticides and chemotherapeutic agents.

The sensations can range from tingling or burning to a sense of numbness akin to wearing a stocking or glove. These sensations can occur individually or all at the same time. The pathology is such that the distal circulation is compromised and the blood vessels themselves have become occluded. It's said that a nerve in pain is screaming for oxygen. Massage therapy is able to supply the surrounding tissue and nerves with that much-needed oxygen, as well as nutrients.

The most effective treatment options for PN involve identifying and working with the underlying problems first. After that, massage therapy can be employed and set the stage for the best possible recovery.

Research into the relation between massage therapy and pain in general is extremely promising. Pain related to arthritis, cancer, and surgery, and many other situations responds positively to welcome touch. Some studies have found that PN sufferers experience significant pain relief with careful bodywork. However, because PN can involve hypersensitivity and even allodynia (the perception that all incoming sensation is painful), no single approach to PN has been demonstrated to be the "best".



Working within the client's tolerance, massage therapy can profoundly and permanently affect neuropathic symptoms in clients. The results can be life-changing. Mayo Clinic reports a fantastic non-drug approach to those desensitized areas. Massage therapy done regularly – at least daily or even twice-daily 15-minute self-care sessions – for each hand and/or foot, for the duration of the symptoms, is essential. Self-care can greatly improve sensory awareness in extremities. Thus, client self-care is a major component of the Mayo protocol. Another non-drug approach is to soak alternately in cold and warm water. Seeking a yoga therapy program that stretches and exercises one's extremities is also helpful. Starting slowly and consistently to reduce oxidative debt is very helpful for peripheral neuropathy. You should never give up hope.

Nancy Sheehan, LMT is owner/director of *Cranbury Therapeutic Massage*. For more information, visit cranburymassage.com.