

What Does My Peripheral Neuropathy Diagnosis Mean?

It's a mouthful. Confused by what it even means? If you have a peripheral neuropathy diagnosis, you may want to better understand specifically what it says about your nerves.

The phrase peripheral neuropathy (or neuropathy to make it easier) is a type of damage to the nervous system. It occurs when there is a problem with your peripheral nervous system, the network of nerves that carries information from your brain and spinal cord (central nervous system) to the rest of your body.

[Peripheral neuropathy](#) is not a lone disease, it is a condition where nerves have been damaged due to an injury, inflammation, or other disorder.

Related: [What is Peripheral Neuropathy?](#)

In simplest terms – since there are over 100 types of neuropathies ([1](#)) – diagnosing peripheral neuropathy is generally a combination of the known factors.

Following are factors that are often included in a peripheral neuropathy diagnosis and what they mean.

1. What Caused the Nerve Damage?

When the cause of nerve damage cannot be traced, it's given the term *idiopathic*, which literally just means “unknown cause.” About a third of all cases are considered idiopathic.

When the cause can be traced, it is sometimes indicated in the peripheral neuropathy diagnosis. Examples of peripheral neuropathy diagnoses that include the cause are:

- Diabetic neuropathy
- Toxic neuropathy
- [Alcoholic neuropathy](#)
- Compression mononeuropathy

2. What Type of Nerve is Damaged?

The type of nerve affected may be included in a peripheral neuropathy diagnosis. This might include one type of nerve fiber or a combination of nerve fibers.

There are three types of peripheral nerves that relay information between your brain and the rest of your body.

1. [Sensory nerves](#) carry sensory information to the brain, like sight, smell, and sensation.
2. [Motor nerves](#) connect the brain and spinal cord to muscles to stimulate movement.
3. [Autonomic nerves](#) connect information with the brain and spinal cord to control involuntary functions, like blood pressure, digestion, and heart rate.

Examples of diagnoses that state which nerve fibers are damaged include:

- small fiber neuropathy (SFN): autonomic fibers and sensory fibers are mainly involved ([5](#)).
- small fiber sensory neuropathy (SFSN): only the small sensory nerve fibers are involved ([6](#)).
- sensorimotor polyneuropathy: affects both sensory and motor nerve fibers.

3. Which Nerves are Damaged?

The location of nerve damage and the number of nerves damaged can vary widely from case to case since neuropathy can affect any part of the body served by the peripheral nervous system.

A peripheral neuropathy diagnosis may reference the general location of damage.

For example:

1. **Distal** indicates the area farthest from the central body (feet)
2. **Symmetric** indicates both sides of the body are affected

A peripheral neuropathy diagnosis will typically indicate the number of nerves affected (one, a few in limited locations, or many throughout the body).

Mononeuropathy

Mononeuropathy is damage that occurs to a single nerve in the peripheral nervous system. It is most often caused by injury where long-term pressure on the nerve from misalignment in a joint, constriction, or swelling. Conditions affecting the whole body (systemic) can also cause damage to one nerve, but it is much less common (2).

Technically, any single nerve can become damaged, but mononeuropathy is more common in nerves that are close to the skin, bone, and joints where they can become compressed (3).

Examples of mononeuropathies are:

- Carpal tunnel syndrome
- Sciatica
- Femoral neuropathy
- Radial nerve dysfunction

Multifocal Neuropathy

Multifocal neuropathy is damage to single nerves in more than one location. This type of neuropathy is rarer than the others and is generally attributed to autoimmune diseases, meaning your immune system mistakenly attacks your nerve cells as if they were invaders.

Motor nerves are usually affected in multifocal neuropathy. Those are the nerves that control your muscles, so damage causes symptoms like weakness, twitching, and cramping.

Polyneuropathy

More commonly, people experience damage in multiple nerves throughout the body, called polyneuropathy (4). Infections, toxins, drugs, cancers, nutritional deficiencies, diabetes, autoimmune disorders, and other systemic disorders can cause many peripheral nerves to malfunction simultaneously.

Polyneuropathies are sometimes broken down into acute (where the condition comes on suddenly) and chronic (where the condition develops slowly over time).

4. What Part of the Neuron is Damaged?

To breakdown a diagnosis further, the type of nerve damage may be identified as well.

There are essentially two types of nerve damage that are typically identified in a peripheral neuropathy diagnosis.

1. **Demyelinating** refers to damage to the protective myelin sheath around the axon and is usually a result of immune-related, genetic, or inflammatory conditions (7).
2. **Axonal neuropathy** refers to damage to the axon, the

nerve fiber which carries electrical impulses. Axon damage occurs in a dying back pattern, starting at the point of damage (as in an injury) or at the furthest point away from the central body (the feet), and progressing towards the central body ([8](#)).

Summary of a Peripheral Neuropathy Diagnosis

A peripheral neuropathy diagnosis is a combination of known factors involved with your condition and may include the location of damage, the type of nerve damage, what part of the nerve is damaged, and/or what caused the damage.

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