Neuropathy

Neuropathy is nerve damage that affects:

- Outer nerves of the arms, legs, hands and feet

Up to one-third to half of the people with HIV have nerve damage in the feet, legs, hands and arms.

Symptoms

The main signs of nerve damage are:

- Skin feels tingly, burns or is painful when touched. This is often the same on both sides of the body. Sometimes there is numbness or no feeling in the feet.
- The first signs are mostly on the soles of the feet. They move up the feet and legs.
- Sometimes neuropathy can start on the hands

Causes

Nerve damage can be caused by the direct effects of HIV on the nerves.

It can also be caused by:

- Lack of B vitamins, especially B12
- Alcohol abuse
- Diabetes
- Infections or tumors
- Some HIV medications (meds)
- Some meds that treat parasites, cancer, infections, syphilis or viruses

Risk Factors

Other things that increase the chance of nerve damage are:

- Poor diet
- CD4 cell count below 100
- Disease linked to AIDS
- Diabetes
- Past nerve damage
- Heavy drinking
- Meds or drugs that affect the nerves

How to Know You Have Neuropathy

A doctor may do a blood test or test your reflexes and nerves for feeling. Sometimes your doctor may order an electrical test of your legs or send you to a doctor who works only with nerve problems.

Treatment

There are many meds and supplements that are used to calm symptoms. Some meds used to treat depression and seizures may help. These start to take effect in a few weeks. They may cause side effects. You may have dry mouth, high blood pressure, feel sleepy or have a hard time peeing.

If a med such causes nerve damage, the signs will show up in the first few weeks. Your doctor may tell you to stop taking that med. The signs take many weeks to go away after the med is stopped. You may be able to take a lower dose later without problems.

A full B vitamin complex pill can prevent nerve damage. Signs of a lack of B12 include:

- Feel very tired

- Hard to recall things

- Low red blood cell count