Nutrition and Neuropathy

By Dr. Garrett Harte

We have all been told that good nutrition can generally lead to a longer healthy life. We also know that diets high in fats and sugars can cause diseases such as coronary artery disease and diabetes. What most of us don’t know is that improper diet can lead to malfunction of our nerves resulting in pain, tingling and burning. Such a phenomenon is called neuropathy. There are many other causes of neuropathy including diabetes, toxins, heredity, alcoholism, chemotherapy and 30% are of unknown causes or idiopathic.

The symptoms of neuropathy can be life altering. Symptoms of sensory neuropathy include vision disturbances, burning, numbness, pain, dizziness, cramps, muscle spasms and lack of muscle control. In other cases the autonomic nervous system if affected and this can cause abnormal blood pressure, constipation, incontinence, inability to perspire and sexual dysfunction. In most cases the symptoms come on quite slowly and can go unnoticed. This is unfortunate because some types of neuropathy can be reversed if diagnosed early enough. In the case of diabetic neuropathy, good blood sugar control can reduce and sometimes even reverse the symptoms of neuropathy.

Nutritional neuropathy can be caused by many different things. Our diets can be lacking certain things or may include things that are harmful. B12 (Cobalamin) has long been known to be linked to nerve health. A deficiency usually leads to a sensory loss with burning or tingling in the feet and hands. Replacing B12 with 500-1000 mcg per day is recommended. B6 (Pyridoxine) and folate seem to go hand in hand with B12. There are products that group these together. A vitamin B complex may have sufficient amounts. A prescription strength B6, B12 and folate product is also proven to be very helpful. Alpha lipoic acid is a dietary supplement that can be taken at 600mg per day to assist in nerve health. Lack of vitamin H (Biotin), which help to form fatty acids, are also needed for proper nerve health.
Dosage is usually 30 mcg per day for an adult. Insufficient B1 (Thiamin) is another cause of neuropathy. B1 is essential for good brain function. Lack of B1 causes Beriberi, a disease that can lead to heart disease and nerve disorders. Alcohol can prevent the absorption of B1. Normal B1 dosage per day is 1.2 mg. B3 (Niacin) should also be sufficient in our diet and 250mg twice a day should be enough. Absorbing adequate amounts of these vitamins it important but it is equally important to know that too much of some things can actually cause neuropathy.

Now that we know what things we may be lacking in our diets that can cause neuropathy, what can we eat to make sure we get these nutrients? Fortified breads, cereals, pasta, whole grains, lean meats, fish, dried beans, peas and soybeans supply us with B1. Beef pork, chicken and yeast products contain high levels of B3. Liver, kidney, dairy and fish supply us with B12. B6 is found in whole grain cereals, liver, vegetables and muscle meats of beef, chicken and pork. Nuts, seeds, leafy greens and vegetable oils are helpful as well.

In addition to the foods we consume, there are many things we should be steering clear of as well. Food allergies can be extremely hard to cope with and have been found to cause neuropathic symptoms. Glutamic acid, aspartic acid, gluten, pesticides on fruits and vegetables, food coloring and dyes are the top offenders. Aspartame, an artificial sweetener, has been linked to causing neuropathy. The good news is that stopping your consumption can often reverse the effects. MSG or monosodium glutamate is another substance that can cause allergy and symptoms of neuropathy. Gluten, eggs and dairy are allergies we hear of more often and can have the unfortunate side effect of neuropathic symptoms. Refined grains and added sugars should be avoided as well due to their high glycemic content. High amounts of these in our diets will bring on diabetes especially in those with a family history.

If you think you may have neuropathy there are several tests that can be performed by a medical professional. Lab testing can include allergy testing, drawing blood and skin biopsies. Biopsying the skin can show the actual diminished numbers of nerve fibers. This is a quantifiable test that can be repeated after treatment to measure actual improvement in nerve regeneration. This testing requires a small amount of local anesthesia and can be performed in the doctor’s office. Results usually take about a week.

Although 30% of neuropathies are idiopathic in nature, 70% are not and should and can be treated. No one should consider neuropathy a normal condition. Neuropathy is extremely common and is treated by myself and my colleagues on a daily basis. Lower extremities seem to be affected most commonly and thus a Podiatric physician is a logical choice to help you diagnose and treat your symptoms.

Dr. Garrett Harte

Dr. Garrett Harte received his B.S. from the State University of New York at Stony Brook and received his doctorate at Pennsylvania College of Podiatric Medicine (Temple University).

He completed his two year surgical residency at West Jersey Health Systems and Wound Care Center in Camden, New Jersey. Dr. Harte is board certified in foot surgery by the American Board of Podiatric Surgery. During his residency he volunteered his time with a team of fellow surgeons in Guatemala to perform reconstructive foot and ankle surgery on children. He found his mission, and pediatrics as a whole, very rewarding. He enjoys lecturing to the public and to his colleagues on topics such as common foot deformities, wound care, limb salvage and surgery and diabetes. He currently is the vice president of the Manasota Podiatric medical society. He also sits on the Surgery committee and the credentials committee at Manatee Memorial Hospital.

Dr. Harte is an exercise enthusiast and has been running in local marathons, half marathons and triathlons for the past eight years. He completed the Florida Ironman in 2009 and enjoys treating fellow athletes. His wife Christine is a personal trainer here in Manatee County. He spends most of his free time with his three children, Jonathan, Patrick and Kaylee. His philosophy is to treat all his patients as if they were part of his own family and give them the best care he can at all times.

Dr. Harte joined Cortez Foot and Ankle Specialists in 1998 after practicing in the Fort Myers area.

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