

## Nerve Pain

### What is nerve pain?

Nerve pain happens when a nerve has damage or does not work right. Nerve pain can develop without a specific cause. The best treatment depends on the severity and causes of the pain, treatment side effects, and your overall health.

### What medicines help nerve pain?

Several medicines help treat nerve pain. Not all medicines listed below are right for every type of pain.

**Anticonvulsants.** These drugs are often a first choice to treat nerve pain. They were first made to control seizures. Their effects on the nervous system also help dull pain. Side effects may include dizziness and drowsiness.

**Antidepressants.** Some drugs first made to treat depression now treat nerve pain. There are two major types:

- **Tricyclic antidepressants** have been used for decades. Many studies show they can help nerve pain. However, these drugs can cause side effects like dizziness, urinary problems, blurred vision, and upset stomach. They may not be safe for some patients such as those with heart problems.
- **SSRIs/SNRIs** (serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors) are newer drugs that have fewer side effects than tricyclics. They might be safer for some patients. Side effects include nausea and drowsiness.

Using these medicines for nerve pain can improve pain and mood. Pain and depression often happen together. Chronic pain can make a person depressed, and depression often makes pain worse.

Some patients worry that taking antidepressants implies the pain is just “in their heads,” but that’s not the case at all. These medicines just happen to help both depression and pain.

**Topical treatments.** These are applied on the skin over the painful area. Gels and patches are two examples. These work best for small, local areas of pain. They have very few side effects.

**Opioid pain medicines.** For severe nerve pain, opioids are sometimes used. They have many side effects. Doctors prescribe opioids only when other methods don’t work. Opioids pose some risk of addiction and abuse. It is very important to take opioids as prescribed.

Other painkillers such as NSAIDs (nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) can help. However, NSAIDs don’t seem to work as well for nerve pain as they do for other types of pain.

**Combination treatments.** Your doctor might prescribe more than one medicine. Combining certain drugs is sometimes better at treating nerve pain than using one alone.

### What other treatments help nerve pain?

While medicines are often the first choice for nerve pain, these methods may also help:

**Electrical stimulation.** You feel nerve pain because a damaged nerve sends an electrical signal to your brain. Some treatments for nerve pain work by sending out electrical impulses that interrupt or block the pain signals.

One example is TENS (transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation). This involves a small device that sends a mild electric current through your skin. TENS is painless and has very low risks.

Other methods are more complex and require surgery. Most often, doctors use surgical approaches only when no other methods work.

**Lidocaine.** This medicine numbs an area of the body. A doctor injects it through a vein (IV).

**Acupuncture.** This therapy uses fine needles placed through the skin at specific points on the body.

## **Supportive Oncology and Survivorship (SOS) Service**

The SOS Service at Huntsman Cancer Institute (HCI) provides support for cancer patients, including help with pain management and other symptoms or concerns.

Specialists from several HCI clinics and programs are part of the SOS Service:

- Supportive Oncology Clinic
- Linda B. and Robert B. Wiggins Wellness and Integrative Health Center
- Patient and Family Support (social workers)
- Spiritual Care Services (chaplain)

Call the SOS Service at 801-213-4246, with questions or concerns, Monday - Friday from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.