

## Neuralgia explained

Neuralgia is pain in a nerve pathway. Generally, neuralgia isn't an illness in its own right, but a symptom of injury or a particular disorder. In many cases, the cause of the pain is not known. Older people are most susceptible, but people of any age can be affected.

Almost everyone will experience mild neuralgia at some point, but these bouts are usually temporary and tend to ease by themselves within a few days. Some types of neuralgia are longer lasting, debilitating and so agonising that a person's quality of life is severely reduced. Trigeminal neuralgia, a condition that usually affects one side of the face only, is said to be one of the most painful medical conditions. Neuralgia can be managed with medications and physical therapy. Surgery is an option in some resistant cases.

### Symptoms

The symptoms of neuralgia include:

- Localised pain.
- The area may be excruciatingly sensitive to touch, and any pressure is felt as pain.
- The pain can be sharp or burning, depending on the affected nerve.
- The affected area is still functional.
- The muscles may spasm.

### Nerve inflammation can trigger neuralgia

Nerve inflammation (neuritis) can trigger neuralgia. Causes of neuritis include:

- **Shingles** - inflammation of a nerve, caused by infection with the herpes virus. This common type of neuralgia is known as post-herpetic neuralgia. The pain may linger long after the shingles rash has disappeared, particularly in areas of the face.
- **Infection** - the nerve can be irritated by nearby infection, such as a tooth abscess.
- **Pressure or injury** - broken bones, slipped vertebral discs (sciatica) or certain tumours can press and irritate a nerve.
- **Syphilis** - in its advanced stages, this sexually transmitted disease affects the functioning of the nervous system.

### Trigeminal neuralgia

This is the most common type of neuralgia, also known as tic douloureux. The trigeminal nerve supplies various areas of the face, including the cheeks and jaw. Trigeminal neuralgia is characterised by sudden jolts of shooting pain that usually affect one side of the face only. Sometimes, a person experiences pain on both sides of the face, though at alternating times. The pain may be severe enough to cause spasms of the facial muscles (tic). Trigeminal neuralgia turns everyday activities, such as teeth brushing or shaving, into agonising events. Even a gentle breeze blowing on the face can trigger pain. Known causes include multiple sclerosis or tumours pressing against the nerve. Women over the age of 50 years are most commonly affected.

### Occipital neuralgia

Irritation of the main nerve that runs from the back of the skull can cause occipital neuralgia. This type of headache or pain is dull, throbbing and localised to the back of the head. The pain can sometimes include the forehead. It is suspected that tense muscles or ligaments may press against the nerve, causing irritation, inflammation and subsequent pain. Other causes may include viral infection, trauma to the neck or bad posture.

## Diagnosis methods

There are no specific tests for neuralgia. Diagnosis relies more on ruling out other possible causes for the pain. Tests may include:

- **Neurological examination** - to determine specific areas of pain.
- **Dental examination** - to check for abscesses that may be irritating nearby nerves.
- **Blood tests** - to check for infection.
- **X-rays** - to see if the affected nerves are being compressed.

## Treatment options

Treatment options include:

- **Treatment for the underlying cause** - such as dental treatment and antibiotics for a tooth abscess, or surgery to remove bone from pressing against the nerve.
- **Pain-killing medications** - such as aspirin or codeine.
- **Anticonvulsant medications** - to treat the pain and muscle spasms associated with trigeminal neuralgia.
- **Antidepressants** - to help relieve pain in some cases.
- **Surgery** - to desensitise the nerve and block pain messages.
- **Physical therapy** - such as physiotherapy and chiropractic.
- **Alternative therapies** - such as acupuncture, hypnosis and meditation.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor.

## Things to remember

- Neuralgia is pain in a nerve pathway.
- Generally, neuralgia isn't an illness in its own right, but a symptom of injury or particular disorders.
- In many cases, the cause of the pain is not known.
- The pain can generally be managed with medication, physical therapies or surgery.

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