

Damage that gets on your nerves

Neuropathic pain, caused by damage or dysfunction in the nervous system, has almost as many symptoms as its causes.

Sufferers range from diabetics and HIV patients to stroke survivors, victims of spinal cord injury and even alcoholics.

Although nerve damage has a wide variety of symptoms, common signs can help doctors diagnose the problem. Patients typically complain of burning, shooting or numbing pain that occurs in short, sharp spasms.

Though damage to the nervous system characteristically produces numbness, the rewiring of nerve fibres in the spinal cord can also lead to some unusual reactions, such as extreme sensitivity to pain (known as hyperalgesia), or a condition called allodynia, in which the patient feels pain when touched.

Modern scientific research has unravelled the mysteries of these pains and treatments are, therefore, much more targeted.

Medication is different from normal painkillers and initial treatment will usually involve local anaesthetic cream and nerve-stabilising drugs.

Drugs used for the treatment of depression or convulsions have also been found to be effective at low doses, as they act to reduce nerve activity.

For some neuropathic conditions, invasive techniques must be used, including transcutaneous nerve stimulation, epidural injections, and spinal cord stimulation, which involves the use of a pacemaker-like implant.

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