SYMPTOM

Numbness and tingling

Numbness is reduced feeling, while tingling often feels like pins and needles.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Pins and needles, reduced feeling, or a prickling sensation

WHERE IT IS FELT
Hands, feet, arms, legs, face, or other skin areas

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Pressure on a nerve, trapped nerves, peripheral neuropathy

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Sudden numbness with weakness, facial droop, or speech trouble

USUALLY LASTS
Minutes after pressure, or longer with nerve conditions

SEE A DOCTOR IF
It persists, returns often, spreads, or affects daily activities

Overview

Numbness means that feeling in part of your body is reduced or absent. Tingling is an unusual skin sensation often described as pins and needles, prickling, buzzing, or crawling.

These symptoms happen when nerves cannot carry signals normally. The problem may be in a small nerve near the skin, a larger nerve in an arm or leg, the spinal cord, or the brain.

Temporary tingling is common after sitting or sleeping in a position that presses on a nerve. Persistent, recurring, or unexplained symptoms deserve medical attention. The pattern and timing often provide important clues, but numbness and tingling do not point to one diagnosis.

What it may feel or look like

You may notice:

Tingling may come and go or remain constant. It can spread gradually, follow a line down an arm or leg, or affect both feet in a "sock-like" pattern.

Numb skin may look normal. Because it is harder to feel heat, cold, pressure, or injury, cuts and burns can go unnoticed.

- Pins and needles, prickling, burning, buzzing, or an electric sensation
- Reduced ability to feel touch, temperature, pain, or vibration
- A hand, foot, arm, or leg that feels "asleep"
- Symptoms in one small area, one side, or both hands or feet
- Clumsiness, balance problems, pain, or weakness alongside altered feeling

Common causes

Common and often temporary causes include pressure on a nerve from sitting, leaning, crossing your legs, or sleeping in one position. Symptoms usually improve soon after you move.

A trapped or irritated nerve can cause repeated symptoms. Carpal tunnel syndrome affects a nerve at the wrist, often causing nighttime tingling in the thumb and nearby fingers. A nerve irritated in the neck or lower back may cause tingling that travels into an arm or leg.

Peripheral neuropathy means damage to nerves outside the brain and spinal cord. It commonly starts in the feet or hands. Diabetes is an important cause. Other possible causes include heavy alcohol use, vitamin B12 deficiency, thyroid disease, kidney disease, infections, and some medicines or medical treatments.

Migraine aura can cause temporary tingling or numbness, sometimes before a headache. Fast breathing during anxiety or a panic episode can cause tingling around the mouth or in both hands, but new symptoms should not automatically be attributed to anxiety.

Less common causes include multiple sclerosis, autoimmune conditions, inherited nerve disorders, and growths pressing on a nerve. These usually cause other symptoms or a continuing pattern.

Urgent causes include stroke, a transient ischaemic attack or TIA, serious pressure on the spinal cord, and rapidly developing inflammation of several nerves. These are less common but need prompt assessment.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services now if numbness begins suddenly, especially on one side, or occurs with:

Stroke symptoms need emergency care even if they disappear. A TIA can cause brief

stroke-like symptoms and is also an emergency.

Seek same-day medical advice if numbness is new and steadily spreading, affects most of a limb, or appears with new weakness. You should also seek prompt care for numbness with a painful blistering rash, particularly on the face, or for an unnoticed foot wound if you have diabetes or poor circulation.

Book a routine appointment if symptoms persist, keep returning, disturb sleep, or affect walking, balance, work, or everyday tasks.

- Facial drooping, arm or leg weakness, confusion, or trouble speaking
- Sudden vision loss, severe dizziness, or difficulty walking
- A sudden severe headache unlike your usual headaches
- Loss of bladder or bowel control, numbness around the genitals or buttocks, or severe back pain
- Rapidly increasing weakness, trouble swallowing, or difficulty breathing
- Symptoms after a serious head, neck, or back injury

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the symptoms started, where they occur, and whether they are constant or triggered by a position or activity. Mention pain, weakness, headaches, balance changes, recent infections, medical conditions, alcohol use, and all medicines and supplements.

An examination may check skin sensation, muscle strength, reflexes, coordination, walking, and circulation.

Tests depend on the pattern. Blood tests may look for diabetes, vitamin B12 deficiency, thyroid problems, or changes in kidney function and body salts. Nerve conduction studies measure how well electrical signals travel through nerves. Imaging such as an MRI may be needed when symptoms suggest a problem in the brain, spine, or surrounding tissues. Not everyone needs testing.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. It may involve relieving pressure on a nerve, managing diabetes or another underlying condition, correcting a confirmed vitamin deficiency, changing

a medicine, or using physical therapy. Do not stop a prescribed medicine without medical advice.

For brief symptoms caused by position, changing position and moving gently may be enough. If an activity repeatedly triggers symptoms, take breaks and avoid prolonged pressure on the affected area.

Protect numb skin from injury:

Do not assume supplements will help. Large doses of some vitamins can themselves damage nerves.

- Check the area for cuts, blisters, swelling, or colour changes
- Test bath water with an unaffected body part
- Wear well-fitting shoes and avoid walking barefoot if your feet are numb
- Avoid direct heat from hot-water bottles or heating pads

What to expect

Pins and needles caused by temporary pressure often settle within minutes after movement. An irritated nerve may improve over days or weeks once the pressure or activity is addressed.

Nerves heal slowly, so recovery from nerve damage can take months. Some long-term conditions cause symptoms that remain stable or require ongoing care. Treating the cause may prevent further damage even when normal feeling does not return completely.

Arrange follow-up if symptoms change, spread, or begin to include weakness or balance problems.

Common questions

Are numbness and tingling the same?

They are related but different. Numbness is reduced feeling. Tingling is an added sensation, such as prickling or pins and needles. They often occur together.

Can anxiety cause tingling?

Fast breathing during anxiety can change carbon dioxide levels and cause tingling around the mouth or in the hands. However, persistent, one-sided, or otherwise unexplained symptoms should be assessed rather than assumed to be anxiety.

Why are my hands or feet numb at night?

Sleeping position can press on nerves. Carpal tunnel syndrome may also cause nighttime hand symptoms. Repeated nighttime numbness is worth discussing at a routine appointment.

Can numbness become permanent?

It can if a nerve is badly injured or remains damaged for a long time. The outlook depends on the cause, severity, and how quickly treatable problems are addressed.

Sources

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