

Putting Your Best Foot Forward: Surgery Helps Stop the Pain of Diabetic Neuropathies

The phrase “peripheral nerve surgery” isn’t easy to pronounce – and as Lauraleigh Mikula learned, it wasn’t easy to find a local surgeon specializing in this type of surgery either.

Lauraleigh suffered from diabetic neuropathies in her feet that became so painful that a walk she took on a beach in Hawaii felt more like a walk across hot coals.

Until recently, the symptoms of diabetic neuropathy in the hands, legs and feet – pain, numbness and loss of sensation – were thought to be due to the diabetes itself and believed to be progressive and irreversible. Lauraleigh’s doctor attempted to help her manage her symptoms with pain medication and specialized footwear, neither of which were effective.

Lauraleigh began researching her condition and found that, in most cases, neuropathies like hers aren’t a direct result of diabetes but a secondary problem that occurs when nerves become compressed or pinched at points of anatomical narrowing – such as joints – in both the upper and lower extremities. She also learned about nerve decompression, a form of peripheral nerve surgery that could potentially relieve her pain and restore normal sensation in her feet.

“As soon as I learned there was a potential solution to my pain, I began looking for a local surgeon skilled in peripheral nerve surgery,” says Lauraleigh. “After looking and looking, I happened to see a television news story about Dr. Tim Tollestrup, a fellowship-trained peripheral nerve surgeon who had recently relocated to Las Vegas.”

Lauraleigh called Dr. Tollestrup the very next day. After having a thorough physical assessment, Lauraleigh received the good news: she was an excellent candidate for nerve decompression surgery.

Within days of having surgery on her legs, Lauraleigh was pain free and had regained normal sensation in her feet. She can now enjoy experiences like the feel of cool waves washing up against her feet – and because the surgery restored her ability to grip her toes, she can also wear her fashionable flip-flops.

“The first line of treatment in diabetes is always to address the underlying medical issue. Diabetics who are able to bring their blood sugar levels under control through medication and lifestyle changes may be able to prevent or minimize the progression of their neuropathy,” says Dr. Tollestrup. “Once significant neuropathy is present, however, nerve decompression surgery offers the possibility of permanently eliminating the pain and restoring sensation.”



Dr. Tim Tollestrup,
peripheral nerve surgeon

Why Peripheral Nerve Surgery Works

Peripheral nerve surgery provides pain relief for more than 80 percent of qualified surgical candidates. To appreciate why, Dr. Tollestrup says it helps to have a basic understanding of the nervous system’s two main components: the central nervous system – the brain and spine – and the peripheral nervous system which consists of sensory nerves (those that allow us to feel touch, heat, pain), motor nerves (which stimulate muscle movement) and the autonomic nerves (which control automatic body functions such as breathing, blood pressure, heart rate and digestion).

Peripheral nerves branch out from the spinal column and travel through and beyond various joints such as those in the knees and toes. These nerves transmit information to and from the brain – so if you put your foot in a scalding bath, sensory nerves fire off a message to your brain warning it that the water is too hot. The brain, in turn, shoots a message to your motor nerves warning them to move before your foot gets burned. As a result, the pain from such an incident is typically short lived.

Pain may have a longer life – and even become chronic – as a result of nerve damage caused by disease, injury or a physical issue that entraps or continually compresses a nerve.

The idea of relieving the symptoms of diabetic neuropathy using the well-accepted surgical concept of nerve decompression was developed by Dr. Tollestrup’s mentor, a plastic surgeon at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. After successfully

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