NEUROPATHY: GAIT CHANGES IN THE DIABETIC FOOT

Motor neuropathy in patients with diabetes can lead to weakness in the muscles of the foot and lower leg, which in turn can lead to characteristic changes to the structure of the foot, such as an altered arch profile. Such structural changes often occur at sites of abnormally high pressure, which can result in tissue breakdown and ulceration particularly in individuals who also have sensory neuropathy.

Peripheral neuropathy is the dysfunction of the peripheral nerves (the nerves that are situated outside the brain and spinal cord), and it is a common problem for many people living with diabetes. Published data has suggested that up to 50% of people with diabetes who present at diabetic foot clinics may have the condition (Edmonds and Foster, 1999).

Peripheral neuropathy can affect many of the body’s nerve pathways, including the sensory nerves, autonomic nerves and motor nerves. Loss of sensation, known as sensory neuropathy, is commonly observed in the diabetic foot (because raised levels of circulating glucose in the blood stream can over time permanently interfere with normal nerve function. The typical clinical features include a loss of sensitivity to touch, pain, temperature and vibration.

Common clinical tests that specifically assess sensory loss include monofilaments, for light touch, and tuning forks, for vibration perception. The 10g monofilament (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence [NICE], 2004) is a nylon fibre mounted on a hand held wand/pen structure. The fibre compresses at a given force when applied to nominated areas informing the practitioner if the person has the ability to feel pressure/pain. The hand-held 128Hz tuning fork is pinched together at its farthest point and released to generate a vibration. The single end of the fork is then gently applied to the nominated area informing the practitioner if the person has the ability to feel vibration (Baker et al, 2005).

Peripheral neuropathy, which is secondary to diabetes, does not just affect the sensory nerves — it can affect other nerve pathways, such as the motor pathways that innervate skeletal muscle, and autonomic pathways that innervate smooth muscle in the blood vessels, and is often referred to as a polyneuropathy.

Motor neuropathy

Motor neuropathy can cause wasting of the small muscles of the diabetic foot. This can subsequently lead to characteristic structural changes, including hammer toes, claw toes and prominent metatarsal heads (Figure 1) (van Schie et al, 2004).

When this is coupled with sensory loss, these areas become prime sites of tissue damage (Figure 2) (McIntosh and Newton, 2007). Foot deformities are common sites for abnormally high pressure because of the body weight exerting pressure down on the foot, which in turn is compressed against the hard surface of the sole of the foot.

Figure 1. Classic structural change in the foot due to motor neuropathy as seen on X-ray.

Veronica Newton and Caroline McIntosh are Senior Lecturers in Podiatry, Centre for Health and Social Care Research, University of Huddersfield
shoe and external floor surfaces, resulting in tissue damage. Repetitive high pressure at sites of deformity can be particularly detrimental for individuals with diabetes as tissue breakdown can occur. Callusities can also develop at sites of high pressure — these can thicken, haemorrhage and eventually ulcerate (Figure 3) (van Schie et al, 2004).

Motor neuropathy and gait
Many of the gait abnormalities recognised in patients with diabetes are a direct consequence of motor neuropathy. Basically, motor neuropathy, or dysfunction of the motor nerves, can lead to wasting of the muscle belly (the fleshy part of the muscle), known as muscle atrophy (Figure 4).

Atrophy of the muscles in the feet can have a profound influence on activities such as walking (gait). Muscle atrophy, dependent on which muscles are affected, can give rise to an altered arch profile, such as a high arched foot (pes cavus) or low arched foot (pes planus) (Figure 5).

Altered arch profiles can also give rise to areas of high pressure on the foot during walking, which can contribute to abnormally high pressure on the plantar surface (sole of the foot).

Gait changes due to motor neuropathy
Wastage in the muscles of the leg can also have a detrimental effect on a patient’s gait. Figure 6 provides a guide to some of the key muscles of the lower limb and their role in the gait cycle.

Proprioception and altered gait
Proprioception is defined as a patient’s perception of their body positioning. Impaired proprioception largely occurs due to sensory neuropathy and it can have a detrimental effect on gait.

Patients with impaired proprioception may present with an ataxic (uncoordinated) gait as they will be unaware of the position of their lower limbs and feet when walking. This can also lead to postural instability, feelings of instability, balance deficits and an increased risk of fall-related injury (Van Deursen and Simoneau, 1999).

Assessment
When undertaking a neurological assessment on a patient with diabetes, it is important to assess the presence of motor neuropathy, particularly if sensory neuropathy is present. The combination of sensory and motor neuropathy can be particularly detrimental and can render the foot vulnerable to deformities and an increased risk of trauma and foot ulceration (van Schie et al, 2004).

A basic assessment of motor neuropathy should include the following measures:
» Observe the patient walking and note any coordination or balance problems. Listen for an audible foot slap, which may indicate atrophy of the tibialis anterior muscle (Figure 6)
» Ask the patient whether they feel unsteady, or have a history of falls/balance problems
Look for any obvious foot deformities, such as hammer toes, claw toes or prominent metatarsal heads. Ask the patient about the history of the deformities — have they recently developed or have they always been present?

Compare both of the patient’s legs. Are they similar? Is there visible muscle wastage? A simple measurement of limb circumference can be used to compare the two legs.

If the healthcare worker is sufficiently trained in the relevant techniques, he or she should test for knee, ankle and plantar reflexes and conduct muscle power tests. If the healthcare worker is not trained in these techniques, the patient should be referred to a specialist nurse or podiatrist.

Knee reflex — on this test the knee (patellar) tendon is tapped with a reflex hammer with the knee flexed and leg hanging freely. Under normal circumstances once stimulated (tapped) the receptor within the tendon should initiate an involuntary muscle contraction and the practitioner would observe a brief rapid extension of the lower leg — known as the knee reflex.

Ankle reflex — this occurs when the Achilles tendon (at the back of the ankle) is tapped with a reflex hammer while the foot is flexed towards the body (dorsiflexed). A positive result would be the jerking of the foot towards its plantar surface (away from the body).

Planter reflex — the lateral side (outside) of the sole of the foot is rubbed with a blunt implement (so as not to cause pain, discomfort or injury) from the heel along a curve to the ball of the foot. A normal response should be observation of toes flexing inwards.

Muscle power test — muscle power can be defined as work done over a given period of time. The tissues being tested are skeletal tissues. Clinically this can be simply assessed by a person’s ability to resist applied force to a given anatomical area.

Knowing when to refer

It is important for healthcare workers to recognise that the management of individuals with motor neuropathy requires a multidisciplinary approach.

Patients who present with a high or low arch profile, or any other foot deformities, should be referred to a podiatrist for assessment. A podiatrist will be able to undertake a biomechanical assessment, including a gait analysis, and prescribe treatment such as orthotic insoles to offload vulnerable pressure areas and minimise the risk of new or recurrent episodes of foot ulceration. Podiatrists may also work closely with orthotists to provide therapeutic footwear, often with extra depth to accommodate any foot deformities.

There are currently no pharmaceutical therapies that prevent or slow the progression of motor neuropathy (van Schie et al, 2004).

Conclusion

Motor neuropathy in patients with diabetes can lead to weakness in the muscles of the foot and lower leg, which in turn can lead to characteristic changes to the structure of the foot.

Deformities such as hammer toes, clawed toes, prominent metatarsal heads and an altered arch profile are common.
Such structural changes are often sites of abnormally high pressure, which can result in tissue breakdown and ulceration, particularly in patients who also have sensory neuropathy.

It is essential, therefore, that healthcare workers consider and assess patients for the presence of motor neuropathy when undertaking routine neurological assessments. If evidence is found, patients should be referred to specialist multidisciplinary teams for further assessment and management to minimise the risk of new or recurrent episodes of foot ulceration.


Figure 6. A guide to some of the key muscles of the lower limb and their role in the gait cycle.