Help for Peripheral Neuropathy

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Peripheral neuropathy (PN), nerve damage that affects many HIV-positive people, often causes a throbbing, burning pain. Capsaicin, created from an ingredient in chili peppers and delivered via patches applied in a doctor's office, has been shown to reduce PN pain by about 30 percent.

If it seems odd that something that burns can soothe blazing pain, know that capsaicin works by knocking out the small nerve fibers responsible for igniting the pain. The fibers begin to regenerate in about a month but don't completely reappear for about three—at which point, the treatment is repeated.

Mary Catherine George researches PN therapies, including capsaicin patches, at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City. The results are important, she says, because capsaicin is currently FDA-approved only for the pain of shingles—making it hard to get insurance companies or Medicare/Medicaid to cover the cost of the applications (about $675 apiece).

The Foundation for Peripheral Neuropathy is building a database of biological information on PN sufferers. Researchers will then be able to mine that trove of data to help develop therapies and, it is hoped, a cure that can reverse the nerve damage. For more information: foundationforpn.org, 877-883-9942.

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