

Peripheral Nerve Sheath Tumour

Information for patients

What is a peripheral nerve sheath tumour?

A peripheral nerve sheath tumour is a growth that develops in the protective covering (sheath) around the nerves outside your brain and spinal cord. These tumours arise from the cells that wrap around and insulate nerve fibres.

The most common types are:

- **Schwannomas**
- **Neurofibromas**

The vast majority (over 95%) of these tumours are benign (non-cancerous).

What causes nerve sheath tumours?

Most nerve sheath tumours occur without any known cause. They may be associated with:

- **Genetic conditions** such as neurofibromatosis (though most occur in people without these conditions)
- **Age** - they can occur at any age but are more common in adults
- **Random cell changes** during normal cell growth and repair.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms can vary depending on the location and size of the tumour:

Common symptoms:

- A soft, moveable lump under the skin
- Gradual growth over months or years
- May be completely painless.

Possible symptoms:

- Mild pain or discomfort
- Tingling or numbness if the tumour affects nerve function
- Weakness in the affected area (uncommon).

Many nerve sheath tumours cause no symptoms and are found incidentally during imaging for other reasons.

How is it diagnosed?

Your doctor has arranged imaging studies (such as ultrasound, MRI, or CT scan) to examine your lump. These scans help to:

- Identify the relationship between the tumour and nearby nerves
- Determine the size and characteristics of the tumour
- Plan appropriate treatment if needed
- Distinguish it from other types of growths.

Do I need treatment?

Treatment depends on several factors:

Monitoring may be recommended if:

- The tumour is small and not causing symptoms
- The imaging appearance is typical of a benign tumour
- It's not affecting your daily activities.

Treatment may be considered if:

- The tumour is causing pain or significant discomfort
- There's numbness or weakness affecting function
- The tumour is growing rapidly
- There's uncertainty about the diagnosis.

What treatment options are available?

Surgical removal is the main treatment option when intervention is needed:

- Usually performed as a day-case or short-stay procedure
- The goal is to remove the tumour and confirm the diagnosis while preserving nerve function
- Your surgeon will discuss the benefits and risks specific to your case.

What are the risks?

For benign nerve sheath tumours:

- The vast majority remain benign and grow slowly if at all
- They do not spread to other parts of the body
- Risk of becoming cancerous is extremely low (less than 5%).

Surgical risks (if surgery is recommended):

- Small risk of nerve damage leading to numbness or weakness
- General surgical risks (infection, bleeding, scarring)
- Your surgeon will discuss specific risks for your case.

What happens after treatment?

If monitoring recommended:

- Regular self-examination to check for changes
- Continue normal activities

After surgical removal:

- Most people recover well with minimal long-term effects
- Follow-up appointments to check healing and nerve function
- Gradual return to normal activities
- Very low chance of the tumour returning.

When should I seek medical advice?

Contact your healthcare provider if you notice:

- **Rapid growth** of the existing lump
- **New or worsening pain**, numbness, or weakness
- **Changes in sensation** in the affected area
- **New lumps** anywhere on your body
- **Any concerns** about symptoms.

Long-term outlook

The outlook for benign peripheral nerve sheath tumours is excellent:

- They are not life-threatening
- Most remain stable or grow very slowly
- If treatment is needed, it's usually very effective
- The vast majority of people continue with normal, healthy lives.

Key points to remember

- Most peripheral nerve sheath tumours are **benign (not cancer)**
- They **grow slowly** and may not require immediate treatment
- **Monitoring** is often the best approach for small, symptomless tumours
- **Surgery is effective** when treatment is needed
- The **long-term outlook is excellent**
- **Regular self-examination** helps detect any changes.

Frequently asked questions

Q: Will the tumour definitely grow larger?

A: Many nerve sheath tumours grow very slowly or remain stable for years. Growth patterns vary between individuals.

Q: Could this be cancer?

A: The vast majority are benign. Your imaging results support this being a benign tumour.

Q: Will I need regular scans?

A: Your doctor will advise on appropriate follow-up.

Q: Can I continue normal activities?

A: Yes, unless specifically advised otherwise by your healthcare team.

Q: What if I have multiple nerve sheath tumours?

A: Multiple tumours may suggest an underlying condition such as neurofibromatosis. Your doctor will discuss appropriate investigations and referrals if needed.

Contact information

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact:

- Your GP in the first instance
- The Bone and Sarcoma Service if specifically advised to do so.

This leaflet provides general information only. Always follow the specific advice given by your healthcare team.