

Desensitisation

Information for Pain Clinic patients



About this leaflet

This leaflet provides general patient information on therapy to help sensations to the skin feel more normal. This is a therapy known as desensitisation.

The goal of these activities is to make sensations to the skin of the body area affected feel more normal. The aim is to re-educate the sensory system, part of which involves areas of the brain.

Is desensitisation suitable for me?

It is suitable for most body areas where the skin feels too sensitive, especially for abdominal scars, upper limb (arms and hands) and lower limb (legs and feet) sensitivity.

It is recommended that these techniques are practised on a daily basis and incorporated into your normal routine. Doing the activity yourself and focusing on it is important too. So, where possible, think how the non-affected body area feels to touch first, and keep that sensation in mind when touching the affected area.

How often should I practice desensitisation?

Practising these activities every day will increase their benefit. It is also recommended that short bouts of desensitisation (even 1–2 minutes) are repeated as many times as possible throughout the day. Setting aside particular times of day to perform these techniques will increase the chance of regular practice. Practising them in a quiet and relaxed environment will guarantee you don't get distracted and help you to concentrate on the task.

Will I have any discomfort?

It is usual for these activities to be uncomfortable and somewhat painful while doing them and shortly afterwards. You may find that there are certain activities that you are unable to tolerate. Choose one that you feel comfortable with and gradually progress to others as you are able. If you experience intolerable pain and discomfort, then stop that activity and find one that is more tolerable.

Suggested desensitising activities

1. Activities of daily living

- **While in bed** – Feel the bed sheet against your unaffected area of the body first. Now compare it to the feeling of the bed sheet against your affected area and recall how that normal sensation felt while thinking about the area you are touching.
- **While dressing** – Use the principles above to compare how the texture of the garment against your skin feels, first on the unaffected area of the body and then on the affected area.
- **While having a bath or shower** – Select the water temperature and pressure to a way you can tolerate it on your affected body area. Feel the water on the unaffected area of your body first and then compare it to how it feels on your affected area whilst looking at it and thinking about it.
- **For upper limbs only** – Experience the temperature and movements of both the affected and unaffected areas of your hands in the water while washing up. Where tolerable, use different water temperatures such as tepid, hot and cold. Immerse your unaffected hand first, then your affected hand for short periods. These periods can be lengthened over time. You can also experience the different textures and actions of making pastry or bread. Again, start with the unaffected hand first.

2. Use of different textures

Applying different textures to the skin is another way to reduce skin hypersensitivity. Gather a variety of rough and smooth textures, such as:

- smooth – felt, satin, silk, velvet, make-up or soft paint brushes
- rough – towelling, netting, scourers, flannel, wool, velcro.

Place them on your unaffected body area and apply movements such as light stroking, firm stroking and tapping. Recall these normal sensations and compare them to how it feels when you try the same textures and the same movements on your affected body part. Try these on a small area and only progress when the previous area feels comfortable. Work from the area closer to the centre of your body to the one further away, for example from the top of the arm towards the hand.

3. Massage

Massaging the affected area can also be beneficial. This can either be done by yourself or someone else, using moisturisers or massage oils. Try them first on a small area to make sure they do not irritate the skin on the affected area.

Use different pressures and movements as you compare the feeling on the unaffected body area with the affected area. Once more, progress from the centre of the body towards the distant areas and from an area of normal sensation to a hypersensitive one.

Contact us

If you have any questions or need further advice please contact the Pain Clinic on 01872 252160.

Adapted from a leaflet provided by experts at the Royal National Hospital for Rheumatic Diseases, with permission.

If you would like this leaflet in large print, braille, audio version or in another language, please contact the General Office on 01872 252690

