

Managing Phantom Pain After Upper Limb Loss

It is common to experience sensations or pain in the limb that is no longer there. This is often referred to as phantom sensations or phantom limb pain. If the experience is uncomfortable, speak to your physician about treatment options. It is recommended that you seek a medical professional to help guide you through treating this pain so make sure it is managed safely and effectively.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PHANTOM SENSATIONS AND PHANTOM PAIN?

Phantom sensations generally aren't painful. These have been described as "pins and needles," itching, or tingling. Phantom pain is when the feelings are more intense and uncomfortable — cramping or aching, stabbing, burning, or electric shock-like sensations. The intensity can vary and change over time.

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT PHANTOM SENSATIONS AND PHANTOM PAIN?

Talk to your physician about any phantom sensations or pain you have. An occupational or physical therapist can design a specific program to help decrease the discomfort. At home, keep track of when the sensations or pain occurs to try to identify anything triggering it. If you cannot identify or eliminate the triggers, try taking your mind off them to help reduce your discomfort.

Here are some suggestions:

- Move around
- Massage or touch your residual limb
- Play a game
- Listen to music
- Watch a video
- Talk with a friend or loved one
- Do something creative
- Apply hot or cold packs (only if you are able to use these safely)

SHOULD I SEE MY DOCTOR ABOUT PHANTOM SENSATIONS OR PAIN?

Yes. Managing phantom sensations and pain is important. Your doctor may prescribe different treatments. Massage, acupuncture, stretching, physical therapy, and occupational therapy have been helpful for many.

Mirror therapy has also been found to be an effective way of managing phantom limb pain. Your occupational or physical therapist can guide you through this type of therapy. It is important to note that it can take some time for this pain to decrease, but with consistency and repetition, you can experience relief.

Some people experience relief with the help of a small battery-powered device called a TENS (Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation) unit, which delivers electrical impulses through the skin surface. Additionally, pain medication may be considered. Your physician will develop a treatment plan that's right for you.

To learn how Andy manages phantom pain after losing his left arm below the elbow, scan the code or visit hclclinic.info/AndysPhantomPain.



For more information, scan the code or visit HangerClinic.com/ULResources.

* Hanger Clinic: Upper Limb Prosthetic Specialty Network

(03/25) ©2025 HANGER CLINIC