

# Desensitisation

## 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 by complex regional pain syndrome (CRPS) feel more normal. The aim is to re-educate the sensory system, part of which involves areas of the brain.

### General instructions

Many of these activities involve touch, and are suitable for the upper limbs (arms and hands) and lower limbs (legs and feet), although some techniques are specific to only one limb as indicated. These activities can be done on a daily basis and incorporated into your normal routine. Where possible, feel the sensation on a part of your body not affected by CRPS first, and remember how that normal sensation felt when then applying to the affected area.

### Regular practice: little and often

Regular practice of these activities will increase the benefit. A short period of desensitisation (even 1–2 minutes) as many times as possible throughout the day is recommended. It might be helpful to set aside particular times during the day to perform them. A quiet, relaxed environment with few distractions will help you to concentrate on the task.

As you progress you may find other activities within your daily routine in which to incorporate these principles.

### Discomfort

It is usual for these activities to be uncomfortable and somewhat painful both while doing them and for a short time 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 to do so.

If you experience intolerable pain and discomfort, then stop that activity and find one that is more tolerable.

### Concentration is important

To help normalise the system, it is important that you concentrate on the quality of the sensation.

This can be done by first undertaking the activity on a limb unaffected by CRPS. Concentrate on how this sensation feels, remember it, and then undertake the activity on the affected area while looking at the limb and thinking about how it feels.

## **Suggested activities**

### **1. Activities of daily living**

Desensitisation therapy can be incorporated into activities of daily living as part of your normal routine.

#### **While in bed**

Feel the bed sheet against your unaffected limb. Close your eyes and concentrate on the quality of that sensation. Now feel the bed sheet against your affected area and recall how that normal sensation felt while thinking about the area you are touching.

#### **While dressing**

Concentrate on your affected limb by looking at it and thinking about it as you get dressed. Feel the texture of the garment against your skin both on the unaffected and the affected areas.

#### **While having a bath or shower**

Select a water temperature that you can tolerate. Feel the water on your unaffected body and now on your affected limb whilst looking at it and thinking about it. Recall how that normal sensation of the water felt against your skin.

Gently rub either a soft flannel, sponge or 'scrunchy' on the unaffected areas of your body. Use various movements such as circular actions, rubbing, patting and stroking. Concentrate on how these normal sensations felt while applying the movements to the affected areas of your body.

### **Activities for the upper limb only**

#### **While washing up**

Feel the temperature of the water on both the affected and unaffected areas of your hands. Think about how the normal sensation of the water feels while concentrating on your affected hand. Focus on the action of your affected hand in the water. 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.

#### **While cooking**

When you are making pastry or bread, mix it with both hands. Concentrate on the texture of the mixture and action as you are doing so.

## 2. Use of different textures

Applying different textures to the skin is another way to re-educate the sensory system.

Gather a variety of rough and smooth textures that you can tolerate. Here are some suggestions:

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

Place them on your unaffected limb and apply movements such as light stroking, firm stroking, tapping, and circular actions. Note the various normal sensations that you feel. Now on the affected limb, apply the texture in similar movements working from an area that you can tolerate towards the more uncomfortable skin areas, for example from the top of the arm towards the hand.

Concentrate on the area by looking at it and thinking about it. Recall the normal sensations that you felt on the unaffected limb.

## 3. Massage

Massaging the affected limb can also be beneficial. This can either be done by yourself or someone else. Moisturisers or massage oils can be used. Be sure not to use anything which may irritate the skin. Use different pressures such as soft touch and firm massage where tolerable. Apply various movements such as patting, stroking, and circular actions. Concentrate on the area being touched by looking at and thinking about it. Massage from your fingers and toes towards the centre of your body.

Reproduced from: Goebel A, Barker CH, Turner-Stokes L et al. Complex regional pain syndrome in adults: UK guidelines for diagnosis, referral and management in primary and secondary care. London: RCP, 2018.

Copyright © 2018 Royal College of Physicians. Reproduced with permission.

**If you have any comments about this leaflet or the service you have received you can contact :**

Physiotherapy Department  
Huddersfield Royal Infirmary  
Telephone: 01484 342434  
MSK Physiotherapy Admin Office: 01484 905380

[www.cht.nhs.uk](http://www.cht.nhs.uk)

**If you would like this information in another format or language contact the above.**

Potřebujete-li tyto informace v jiném formátu nebo jazyce, obraťte se prosím na výše uvedené oddělení

Jeżeli są Państwo zainteresowani otrzymaniem tych informacji w innym formacie lub wersji językowej, prosimy skontaktować się z nami, korzystając z ww. danych kontaktowych

ਚ ਤੁਸੀਂ ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਕਿਸੇ ਹੋਰ ਪ੍ਰਾਚੂਪ ਜਾਂ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਵਿੱਚ ਲੈਣਾ ਚਾਹੁੰਦੇ ਹੋ,  
ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਉਪਰੋਕਤ ਵਿਭਾਗ ਵਿੱਚ ਸਾਡੇ ਨਾਲ ਸੰਪਰਕ ਕਰੋ।

اگر آپ کو یہ معلومات کسی اور فارمیٹ یا زبان میں درکار ہوں، تو  
برائے مہربانی مندرجہ بالا شعبے میں ہم سے رابطہ کریں۔

"إذا احتجت الحصول على هذه المعلومة بشكل مغاير أو مترجمة إلى لغة مختلفة فيرجى منك الاتصال بالقسم  
المذكور أعلاه"