

Service: **Bristol Centre For Enablement**

Phantom Limb Pain



Bristol Centre for Enablement is part of North Bristol NHS.

NHS Trust. What is phantom limb pain?

Phantom limb pain refers to ongoing painful sensations that seem to be coming from the part of the limb that is no longer there. People can also experience phantom limb sensations which are not painful, for example itching. The limb has gone, but these feelings are very real and can be addressed by the multidisciplinary team at your limb centre.

When does the pain usually start?

It can develop immediately after surgery or at a later stage but most often occurs soon after surgery. It can feel like a variety of sensations, such as burning, shooting, stabbing, itching, or pressure. It is often felt in the foot or toes, and it is very common for amputees to experience this kind of pain.

How long does the pain last for?

The length of time this pain lasts differs from person to person. It can last from seconds to minutes, to hours, to days. For most people, pain will lessen in both frequency and duration over time.

What causes phantom limb pain?

The precise cause of phantom limb pain is unknown. Injury to the nerves during amputation causes changes in the central nervous system. Parts of the brain which controlled the missing limb remain active. This causes the very real illusion of the phantom limb even though the amputee knows it's not real! Nerves are used to send messages to and from the brain to the lower limbs via the spinal cord. During amputation the nerves are cut and the ends can become more sensitive. Messages are sent to and from the spinal cord along these nerves and when the limb is amputated the spinal cord becomes confused. The confusion can result in a sensation of pain in a limb that is no longer there.

How is phantom pain treated?

It can be difficult to treat phantom pain as the effectiveness of treatment varies between people. Some of the treatment options are listed below.

Juzo Sock – this is an elasticated compression sock which helps with swelling and may help to reduce phantom limb pain.

Desensitisation – initially the end of your limb will be sensitive to touch. Desensitisation is important to prepare for wearing an artificial limb also called prosthesis. Techniques include touching, lightly massaging, tapping, and rubbing different textures of fabrics over the end of your limb. It is also important to look at the end of your limb using a mirror if needed as this helps the brain to learn the limb is no longer there.

Distraction – Do things that take your mind off the pain such as reading, listening to music, talking to friends/family.

Medication - Phantom pain will usually decrease over time. Some of the medications that you may be given include the following.

1. Simple analgesics such as paracetamol, which, if taken regularly and in combination with other types of pain relief medicines is a very effective painkiller.
2. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDS) such as ibuprofen.
3. Anticonvulsants such as gabapentin, and pregabalin.
4. Antidepressants such as amitriptyline are commonly prescribed and work directly on the nerves on your leg.
5. Opioids such as codeine or morphine.

Relax sock - The Relax Night Care Sock is a sock which can relieve phantom pain as a result of its electromagnetic screening properties. This sock is intended to be worn at night, when you are sleeping. Many amputees have found that a relax sock has reduced their phantom pain, and for some it has completely resolved their pain altogether.

TENS - This treatment using electrodes placed on the residual limb, causes a tingling sensation which may reduce the pain. Over long term use any stimulation of nerves in the area tends to help dispel the confusion in the central nervous system which is the root cause.

Mirror therapy - This is a type of motor imagery where you move your unaffected leg/arm while watching the movement in a mirror. This is not suitable for all patients and we would advise you to talk to a clinician first.

What you need to remember

- Pain is never just physical.
- Sometimes the pain is so real you may forget that your limb is no longer there and may attempt to stand up and then fall over.
- It is important to remind yourself that you don't have a limb, particularly when you first wake up.
- Phantom limb pain is common for most people after amputation surgery and generally symptoms improve over time.
- Your phantom limb pain can be managed so that it does not overwhelm your life.
- Do not suffer in silence, and if you have any further questions please speak to a member of the BCE team.

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How to contact us:



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If you or the individual you are caring for need support reading this leaflet please ask a member of staff for advice.

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