

Information about Desensitisation Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS)



**Pain Management
Physiotherapy Service**

We can use a technique known as Desensitisation to help Complex Regional Pain Syndrome. This involves activities 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 are specific to one limb. You can do these activities on a daily basis and incorporate them 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 applying to the affected area.

Regular practice: little and often

Regular practice of these activities will increase the benefit. We recommend a short period of desensitisation (even 1–2 minutes) as many times as possible throughout the day. It might be helpful to set aside particular times during the day to do these activities. 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 whilst doing them and shortly afterwards. You may find

that there are certain activities that you are unable to cope with. Choose an activity that you feel confident to start 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 you can cope with.

Concentration is important

To help normalise the sensory system, it is important that you concentrate on the quality of the sensation. You can do this 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, whilst looking at it and thinking about it.

Suggested activities

1) Activities of daily living (Everyday activities)

You can incorporate desensitisation therapy into everyday activities as part of your normal routine.

Whilst 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 whilst thinking about the area you are touching.

Whilst 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.

Whilst having a bath or shower

Select a water temperature that you can cope with. 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 cloth, 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 whilst applying the movements to the affected areas of your body.

Activities for the upper limb only:

Whilst 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 whilst concentrating on your affected hand. Focus on the action of your affected hand in the water. If you can, use different water temperatures such as tepid, hot and cold. Place your unaffected hand in the water first, then your affected hand for short periods. You can gradually increase the length of time your hands are in the water.

Whilst 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. You can do this on your own or ask someone else to help. You can use moisturisers or massage oils. 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.

Further Information

If you have any questions please contact:

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

Notes:

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