



Scar desensitisation following hand surgery

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Version 1

About this leaflet

The purpose of this leaflet is to provide advice to make a scar less sensitive and feel more normal after hand surgery.

Background

Following surgery, scars and the surrounding area can sometimes become overly sensitive, tender and painful to touch. This is known as hypersensitivity and occurs in the hand because the nerves are more sensitive than different parts of the body.

It is important for scars and the surrounding skin to get used to being touched and used normally as soon as possible following surgery. This reduces the risk of developing hypersensitivity and speeds up recovery if you have hypersensitivity.

If you avoid touching the sensitive areas of your hand following surgery, the hypersensitivity will not improve and may get worse.

General instructions

Many of the activities outlined in this leaflet involve touch and can be carried out as part of your daily routine. If possible, do these activities in a relaxed environment with no distractions and concentrate on the activity. Compare the sensation you feel on a non-sensitive area to the sensitive area.

Try to do these activities 3-4 times a day for a few minutes each time.

It is usual for these activities to be uncomfortable and possibly even painful. Try to choose materials and activities that you are able to tolerate and progress them as you feel able. If you experience intolerable pain or discomfort, stop that activity and try one that is more tolerable.

Activities

1. Use different textures and materials

This is a great way of re-educating the nerves in your hand. Collect a variety of materials with rough and smooth textures. Examples are in the box below for ideas, but feel free to use your own ideas as well!

Smooth Textures	Rough Textures
Felt Satin Velvet Soft make up or paint brushes Wool/cotton wool	Towelling Netting Scourers Flannel / face cloth Hook velcro

Place these different materials on your unaffected hand and move them in different ways such as light-stroking, firm-stroking, tapping and circular movements. Concentrate on what this feels like. Then, carry out the same movements on the affected hand. Start with an area you can tolerate and move into the sensitive area. Concentrate on the area by looking at it while thinking about it, and remember the normal sensation you felt in the unaffected hand.

2. Activities of Daily Living

In Bed

Feel the bed sheet against your unaffected limb. Close your eyes and concentrate on what that feels like. Now, feel the bed sheet against your affected area and remember what that normal sensation felt while thinking about the area you are touching.

Dressing

Concentrate on your affected limb by looking at it and thinking about it as you get dressed. Feel the texture of your clothes against your skin on both on the unaffected and the affected areas. Specifically focus on cuffs and gloves if you are wearing them.

Bathing / Showering

Select a water temperature as warm or cold as you can tolerate. Feel the water on your unaffected body and then 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.

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.

Cooking / Preparing food

If you are eating pasta, try putting uncooked pasta into a bowl then placing your unaffected hand into it and moving it around, paying attention to how this feels.

Then, carry this out with your affected hand, recalling how it felt on your other side.

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

3. Massage

Massaging the affected limb can also be beneficial for both sensitivity as well as flattening and softening the scar. Massage can either be done by yourself or someone else.

Moisturisers or massage oils can be used, but make sure not to use anything that may irritate the skin. Non-perfumed moisturisers are best, such as E45 or double base.

Use different pressures such as soft touch and firm massage where tolerable. Apply various movements like patting, stroking and circular actions. Concentrate on the area being massaged by looking at and thinking about it.



➤ Contact

If you have any questions or concerns, please email handsurgery@gjnh.scot.nhs.uk or contact the orthopaedic clinic during office hours on 0141 951 5553.

For out of hours, you should contact the Senior Nurse via the switchboard on 0141 951 5000.

You can also scan this QR code on your smart device to access our video on post-operative hand surgery (scar management).



Reference:

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

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