

What Is Phantom Sensation? Why Does It Occur?

Phantom sensation is a feeling or a movement that involves the limb which is now absent.

Phantom sensation is almost inevitable following amputation of a limb. One theory to explain this is that the brain has developed a recorded image of the limb and when normal messages from the limb are lost due to amputation the brain attempts to reconstruct an image of the limb, hence phantom sensation.

The positive side of this is that the brain has an amazing capacity to relearn and this is greatly helped by increasing normal input, for example, moving, touching or best of all, using the residual limb to enable a new image of the limb to be created.

What is Phantom Pain? Why does it occur?

Phantom pain sometimes occurs in the weeks following amputations and, like phantom sensation, resolves over time in most people. It may return on occasions, for example, when you are generally unwell or there are particular problems with the residual limb.

One theory behind phantom pain is that there is a loss of normal signals to the spinal cord and nervous system and this causes confusion along the nerves which is perceived by the brain as pain. Phantom pain generally resolves over time and certainly becomes tolerable in most cases. One of the best strategies to manage phantom pain is to move and touch the residual limb and, as appropriate, use medication.

Medication may include drugs that stabilise the nervous system these are also used in treating epilepsy, alternatively antidepressants may be used dampen down nerve activity and can also promote sleep. Occasionally muscle relaxants are recommended, particularly if there is a feeling of spasm associated with the phantom phenomenon. Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS) helps to block the pain transmission and can assist in the relief of pain without medication.

Alternative techniques that have been used are massage, stretching, acupuncture and applying heat or ice packs it is always recommended to speak with your health care professional regarding alternative treatments for phantom pain to ensure you are using a method that is safe for you.

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