

Treating sensitivity in hand scars (desensitisation)

Occupational Therapy

Information for Patients

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Introduction

We rely on our hands as the most important tool in touching and because of this they are naturally more sensitive than other parts of your body. After an injury or operation to your hand it can often be very tender and nerves within the scar on the skin can sometimes become very sensitive. Stimulation to the skin in that area, such as touch or pressure, can feel unpleasant, oversensitive and even painful.

This should improve over time, however for some people this sensitivity can worsen if left untreated. This reaction is known as 'hypersensitivity'.

This leaflet will tell you about different treatment exercises and techniques that can be used to reduce hypersensitivity in a scar on your hand. This process is called 'desensitisation'.

How will the treatment exercises help?

The aim of the exercises is to make the scar on your hand less sensitive. They will help you to teach or 're-educate' your hand to respond normally to touch. After any injury, the skin of the hand must get used to being touched again for the tenderness to go away. If you do not touch the sore areas of your hand, they may remain very sensitive and tender.

The exercises should be performed 4 to 6 times a day. However, the more you can do, the quicker recovery can be.

At first the treatment exercises may be uncomfortable, even painful, but it is important to stick with it. In time you should find that you become more tolerant to things that previously caused you discomfort or pain.

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Desensitisation exercises

The following treatment exercises should be carried out once your wound is closed and dry. Do them 4 to 6 times a day.

Massage:

Using a perfume-free moisturizer (for example E-45 cream), massage firmly over and around the sensitive area in circular movements. Continue for 5 minutes.

You may want to begin away from the sensitive area and gradually move towards the area that is sensitive. Gradually increase the pressure you apply as the area becomes less sensitive.

Material and texture massage:

- Using various different materials and textures, work out the order which causes you the least and the most discomfort against your scar. Some of these materials and textures may be given to you by your therapist, but you can use items from around your home (e.g. a towel, a child's toothbrush, the seams on your clothes).
- Begin with the material that causes the least discomfort. Gently rub the material over a non-sensitive area so the hand can feel what a 'normal response' to the material is. Then, progress to gently rubbing the material around the sensitive area, working towards and over the area. Make sure the material is in constant contact with the skin and that the pressure is even.
- Continue to rub the area for about 5 minutes until the area feels numb or no longer sensitive to that material.
- After 1 hour return to the same material and repeat.
- When this material is no longer uncomfortable you can then move to the next material/texture.
- If using rough materials (for example hook velcro), rub gently to avoid causing any skin damage.



Hand dipping (immersion massage):

- Using a range of different small objects with different textures (e.g. uncooked rice grains, lentils, beads), work out the order which causes you the least and the most discomfort against your scar.
- Fill a bowl with the object that is most easiest to touch. Place your uninjured hand/ area in the bowl so your brain feels what a 'normal response' to the object is.

- Then place your injured area amongst the objects in the bowl, moving it around in circles for 2 minutes. Vary the direction and speed.
- As your discomfort improves, gradually move onto the more uncomfortable objects.
- You can also put a mixture of small objects into the bowl, such as buttons or keys and pick them out with your injured hand as you are able.



Tapping (percussion):

Gently tap the affected finger onto a table.

As this becomes more comfortable, try tapping the finger against different types of surfaces. Gradually increase the pressure when you tap, as you find it easier.



Everyday activity:

Use your hand for your usual everyday activities, where able to do so, in as much of a normal way as possible.

It is easy to exclude your injured area without noticing, so think of how you would normally use it in the everyday activity, and try to copy that.

Start off with light activities, such as washing dishes or playing cards, and move onto heavier activities as you improve.



What to expect

It may take several sessions before you notice some improvement. Your therapist will tell you on how long to continue doing the treatment exercises for.

These techniques can be uncomfortable at first, but this will improve if carried out regularly. If you are finding the desensitisation programme difficult, or feel your symptoms are not getting better or getting worse, please contact your occupational therapist. It may be recommended that you come to the Occupational Therapy Department for regular rehabilitation sessions. Use of our equipment as well as completing your home desensitisation programme may help you to get better results and achieve your goals.

Contact details

Name of Occupational Therapist: _____

Telephone number: _____

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