



# Desensitization Techniques For Chronic Nerve Pain

## How do desensitization techniques work to treat pain?

Often times with chronic nerve pain, a cycle develops between decreasing function and higher levels of pain (this is called the pain-function cycle). Desensitization techniques help break that cycle. They provide the brain with different sensations which then begin to be processed more normally.

The focus of the techniques are to improve function and help your child return to normal daily activities; for example, wearing shoes and socks on the foot that has pain. Over time the pain will decrease as the affected body part receives normal sensory input and use of that body part increases.

## What is the role of Physical and Occupational Therapy in treating chronic nerve pain?

Physical and occupational therapists evaluate your child's pain and teach techniques called "desensitization." These techniques help reduce the affect of pain on your child's lifestyle and ability to do normal daily activities.

## Desensitization treatments to do with your child:

Below are some ideas of activities to do several times a day as instructed by your child's therapist. Begin with a few seconds at a time and increase until your child can do the suggested activity for about 5 to 15 minutes, 2 to 3 times per day. It is important to vary the type of sensory input so that your child gets used to and tolerates different types of sensations.

- **Vigorous and light touch massage.** This can be done by you or your child to the area that hurts (it is best to use body lotion).
- **Towel rubs.** Use varying textured cloths or towels (such as polar fleece or cotton towels) to gently rub the affected area.
- **Gentle rubbing.** Use a soft brush like a surgical scrub brush or soft facial or nail brush to gently rub the affected area.
- **Rice or sand bins.** Fill an empty storage bin or plastic dish tub with clean sand, uncooked rice, or uncooked beans. Have your child move the affected body part through the bin or dig into the bin with fingers or toes to look for and retrieve small toys or other objects from the bin.
- **Theraputty.** Theraputty is soft putty that you can get from your child's therapist. Your child can use it to exercise with their hands or feet.
- **Contrast baths.** Use two large bowls or plastic dish tubs, one with cool water and a few ice cubes and one with warm water. Immerse the affected body part in one bin for 2 to 3 minutes then switch to the other bin. Repeat this 2 to 3 times. Always finish with the warm water bath.

## Desensitization Techniques for Persistent Nerve Pain

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Tennis ball “peanut”

- **Foam roll or “peanut” massage.** You can do rolling and massaging with a foam roll or a “peanut” made out of two tennis balls taped together in the shape of a peanut (see image). Use the foam roll or peanut to provide pressure to areas on the back or limbs by leaning or rolling on or against it.

### Other suggestions

Only try these if your child’s therapist or doctor says it is OK.

- Stop or reduce the use of splints, braces, wheelchairs, walkers or crutches so that your child can begin moving and using the affected body part.
- Encourage your child to use their arms, legs and back normally in order to break the pain-function cycle.

### To Learn More

- Occupational & Physical Therapy  
206-987-2113
- Ask your child’s healthcare provider
- [www.seattlechildrens.org](http://www.seattlechildrens.org)

### Exercise

Conditioning and aerobic activities are a very important part of treating and managing persistent nerve pain. Your child’s therapist or doctor may recommend that your child start with 15 to 30 minute sessions of movement-based exercise. Aerobic exercise (such as brisk walking, jogging, biking, swimming, skating, dancing, stair or hill climbing) has been shown to be best for returning to normal function. It is important that your child use the affected body part as much as possible during exercise.

Help your child focus on improved function and being able to take part in normal activities rather than on the pain or what they cannot do.

### Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your child’s nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.

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Seattle Children’s offers interpreter services for Deaf, hard of hearing or non-English speaking patients, family members and legal representatives free of charge. Seattle Children’s will make this information available in alternate formats upon request. Call the Family Resource Center at 206-987-2201.

This handout has been reviewed by clinical staff at Seattle Children’s. However, your child’s needs are unique. Before you act or rely upon this information, please talk with your child’s healthcare provider.

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