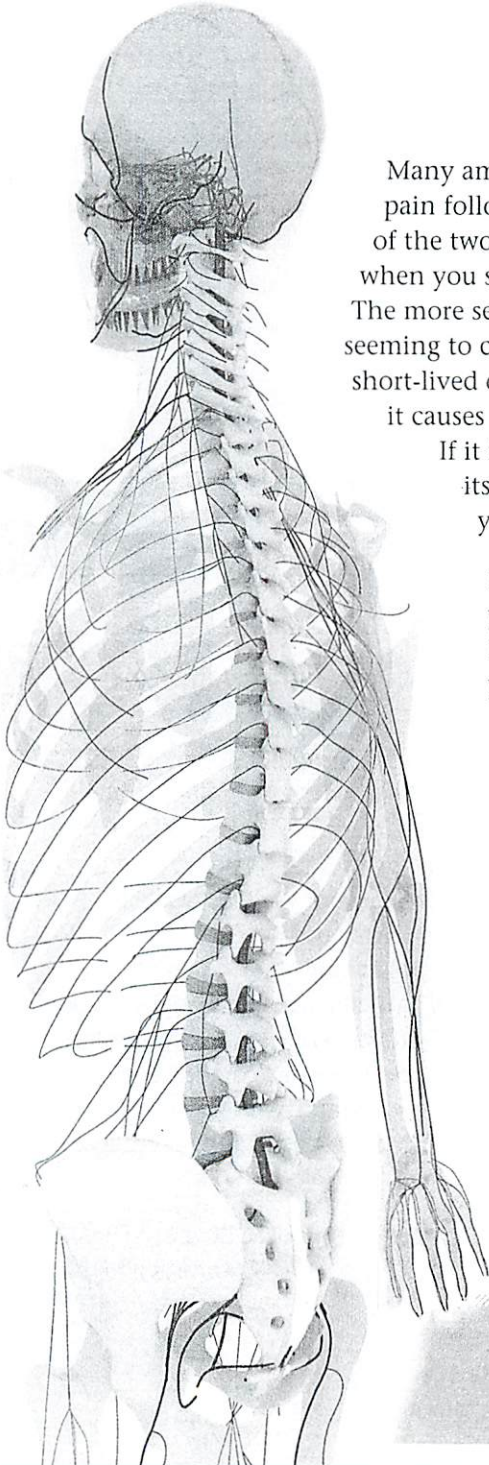


Phantom Sensation and Pain

What is it and will it go away?

by Pete Seaman, CP, CTP

It is thought that these sensations are caused by a disruption of your nervous system.



Many amputees experience phantom sensation or pain following an amputation. The less troublesome of the two is the phantom sensation, which occurs when you still seem to feel your missing limb, foot or hand. The more serious experience occurs when you have phantom pain seeming to come from a portion of your missing limb. This pain can be short-lived or last for extended periods of time. It can be so intense that it causes significant discomfort and can even interrupt sleep patterns. If it is frequent and intense, medication might be required to reduce its impact on your lifestyle. You should consult your physician if you experience persistent and significant phantom pain.

It is thought that these sensations are caused by a disruption of your nervous system that occurs as a result of your amputation. During your amputation, the nerves that normally extend beyond your level of amputation will be severed. These cut nerve endings seem to continue sending electronic signals to the brain that give the impression to your brain that you still have some or all of your missing limb. It can take time for these severed nerves to calm down (desensitize) and heal, and for your brain to reprogram itself and get used to not having the portion of your leg that was removed.

What can you do when these sensations occur?

If they are not severe, acknowledge them and move on. I've heard of amputees scratching their sound-side ankle when they feel as if their amputated ankle itches, and that this helps. I've also heard that massaging your residual limb can help when phantom sensations or pain arise. Also, wearing your liner or a shrinker sock that compresses your residual limb brings relief from pain to some amputees.

If the sensations or pain persist or become severe to the point of adversely affecting your lifestyle, consult your physician, as there are medications that can often help treat these symptoms.