

Desensitization

For patients at Harborview Medical Center

This handout explains desensitization, and how it is used at Harborview Medical Center to help burn and graft patients.

What is desensitization?

Desensitization uses gentle pressure on sensitive areas of your skin. It teaches your nervous system to accept mild touch again after your skin has been damaged. Desensitization is defined as “retraining the nerves to know what the everyday tolerance should be.”

How do I desensitize healed burned skin or new skin grafts?

It is best if you can do desensitization for yourself, rather than having someone else do it for you. You will be able to tolerate more touch when you are in control of the process, and you will also know when to take a break.

To help desensitize your skin:

- Touch your healed skin when you apply moisturizer.
- Using a finger, hold pressure on sensitive areas and then release. Start with a very light touch and slowly increase the pressure you apply.
- Gently squeeze your skin.
- Lightly tap your skin.
- Place items with different textures on your skin. For example, try dry and wet washcloths, ice, or different types of fabrics such as denim, cotton, and microfiber.



Please talk with your provider if you have any questions about desensitization.

Why do burn survivors and graft patients need to know about desensitization?

When skin is healing, it is very sensitive to touch. Desensitization:

- Reteaches your nerves that normal touch and stimuli are not painful
- Allows you to tell the difference between pain and sensitivity
- Helps you become used to wearing normal clothes and accepting kind touch from people such as a hug, a friendly pat on the back, or a hand shake

Remember that touching your skin will cause pain at first. But, as you desensitize your skin, it will hurt less and less. The good news is that nerves learn quickly.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call one of the numbers below if you have questions or concerns.

Weekdays from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., call the Burn/Plastic Surgery Clinic: 206.744.5735

After hours and on weekends and holidays, call the 24-hour nurse at the Community Care Line: 206.744.2500