Managing pain

There are two types of pain you may experience following an amputation; pain in your residual limb (stump) and pain in a part of the limb that has been amputated, called phantom limb pain.

What is Residual Limb Pain?
Residual limb pain occurs either as the result of the surgery, swelling associated with the surgery, a fall that results in a bruise, or an infection. Residual limb pain is often treated with pain killing medications.

Over time, cut nerves in the residual limb (stump) can grow into nodules/bulbs called neuromas. Bone can also grow and become pointy. This is called a bony spur. Neuromas or bony spurs may cause residual limb pain when placed under pressure, or during walking.

What to do: If you are experiencing residual pain with pressure or when walking, you should see your prosthetist or rehabilitation specialist.

What is Phantom Limb Pain?
Phantom limb pain is pain that is experienced in the amputated limb. It can range from severe electric shocks to a mild ache, lasting for seconds or sometimes hours. Many amputees experience these pains. In some cases it may resolve over time but can return periodically if a person is feeling unwell, stressed or overtired.

What to do: Often massaging or touching the residual limb, wearing a wool sock, shrinker or prosthesis, will help ease phantom pain. Speak to your doctor if you are unable to cope with residual or phantom limb pain as there may be medication to help ease the pain.

What Is Phantom Sensation?
Phantom sensation is the feeling that the amputated limb still exists. A person with phantom sensation may experience itchiness, coldness or twisting of their limbs or digits, movement of their limb, or telescoping. Telescoping is the sensation that the amputated limb has become smaller than it was prior to the amputation.

What to do: Similar to phantom pain, massaging or touching the residual limb (stump), wearing a wool sock, shrinker or prosthesis will help ease phantom sensation.

How to cope with or manage pain
Psychological factors (the way we think and behave when we have pain) are very important when dealing with pain. Feeling grumpy, irritable or depressed is a natural response to pain and suffering. This is important to remember as sometimes pain can be difficult to treat with medication alone. A psychologist, social worker or counsellor may be able to teach you ways to better cope with and control pain.

What to do: Speak to a psychologist, social worker or counsellor to learn how to cope with pain.

For more information:
Phone: 1800 ENABLE (1800 362 253); enable@health.nsw.gov.au; www.enable.health.nsw.gov.au