

## Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS)

*For pain control*

*This handout tells how to use transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) to help relieve your pain. Your nurse will go over this with you. Please ask any questions you have.*

### What is transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation?

*Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) is one way to control pain. TENS will not replace your pain medicine, but it might let you use less medicine or just get more relief.*

### The TENS System

The TENS system delivers a very low-level electrical pulse through small pads (*electrodes*) placed near your incision or other painful site. This electrical pulse may interrupt the pain signals in your body and help you feel less pain.

The TENS system has 2 parts:

- A control unit, kept next to your bed or on your *intravenous* (IV) pole
- A cable that connects to the electrodes on your body

### How do I use the TENS system?

#### The Control Unit

- The control unit has different settings called *modes*. Your nurse will tell you which mode is best for your needs.
- After choosing the best mode for you, you and your nurse will slowly turn up Channel 1. The arrow buttons control how strongly you will feel the electrical pulse. It is best if the pulse is strong, but not painful.



*Ask your nurse if you have any questions about how to use the TENS system.*

- Then you and the nurse will turn up Channel 2. You will want to feel the pulse often, but you do not want it to be irritating or painful.

### **The Electrodes**

- Place electrodes on clean intact skin on either side of the painful area.
- Make sure the electrodes at least 2 inches apart, but less than 8 inches apart.
  - *For incisions:* Place 1 electrode from each channel at the top and 1 from each channel at the bottom of the incision.
  - *For painful areas:* Place 1 electrode from each channel on either side of the painful area.
  - You can also place both channels on 1 larger area or treat 2 different areas.

### **Using the System**

After you place the electrodes and set your channels, leave the system on for 30 to 60 minutes. This can help decrease your pain for many hours.

The goal is to find the right setting. You want the setting that will ease your pain and that you can also tolerate for up to 1 hour. If needed, you can change the channel settings while the system is on.

### **Why should I use TENS?**

TENS has been used for many years. In the past, it was mostly used for *chronic* (long-term) pain conditions. But, TENS therapy is also helpful for *acute* pain (pain that lasts a shorter time, and slowly gets better).

Pain after surgery is one type of acute pain. We know that people get better pain control if they use both medicines and non-drug therapies like TENS at the same time.

### **When should I use the TENS system?**

We suggest you use the TENS system often, but for short periods. It works best to use it for about 30 to 60 minutes at a time.

Use the TENS system:

- **When your pain is getting worse.**
- **Before you start something that can cause pain** (such as turning, walking, coughing, or deep breathing). A belt clip comes with the TENS system so that you can use it while you walk. Make sure the electrode wires are firmly in place before you get up to walk. This will lessen your risk of tripping.

- **To help you relax when you are getting ready to sleep.** But, always remove the electrodes from your skin and turn off the system before you fall asleep. Do **not** leave the TENS system on while you are sleeping.

### **About the Electrodes**

- Make sure your skin is clean, intact, and dry before you place the electrodes.
- When you take a break from using the TENS machine, remove the electrodes from your skin and put them back on the plastic card. Put them back on your skin when you want to use TENS again.
- If the electrodes get too moist, take them off your skin and let them air dry.
- If the electrodes get too dry and do not work, you can place small drops of water on them.
- If you get a rash on your skin around the electrodes, stop using TENS and tell your nurse.
- The TENS electrodes can be used for a long time. You most likely will not need to replace them while you are in the hospital.

### **How will TENS affect my pain?**

Using TENS will not make you pain-free. But, it should allow you to rest and be more comfortable when you move around.

After using TENS for a long time, your body can get used to the signal and it will not control your pain as well. It helps to let your body rest by turning off the TENS. Once it is off, be sure to remove the electrodes.

If your pain is not well controlled, please tell your doctors and nurses. They may change the amount or type of medicine you are taking to give you better pain control.

### **What do I do with the TENS system when I leave the hospital?**

The TENS system you use during your hospital stay will remain in the hospital. If you think you would benefit from using TENS at home, talk with your doctor about outpatient TENS therapy.

#### **Questions?**

Your questions are important. Call your nurse if you have questions or concerns.

Weekdays from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., call your clinic:

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After hours and on weekends and holidays, call the Community Care Line nurse: 206.744.2500.