

# TENS machines - an electronic method of pain relief

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## What is TENS?

A transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) machine works by creating a tingling or buzzing sensation on your skin. This can help to block or suppress pain messages to your brain.

TENS machines are small, lightweight, battery operated devices that fit into the palm of your hand. They have rubber electrodes that attach to your skin, with leads connected to the machine. The electrodes are either self-adhesive or attach to your skin using water-based gel and adhesive tape. They are usually positioned either side of the area of most intense pain. You will be able to control the strength (or 'volume') of the current that is passed through the electrodes, with a rotary knob or dial. Some machines have larger controls that are easier to use if your hand movements are limited.

Some TENS machines have two electrodes and some have four, used to treat a larger area of pain. A low voltage current is passed through the electrodes and you feel a buzzing or tingling sensation. This can be increased until the sensation is slightly painful. You can then turn the current down until it is fairly strong but not uncomfortable.

## How can I try a TENS machine?

You can ask your doctor to refer you to a physiotherapist to try a TENS machine. If TENS helps to relieve your pain, your physiotherapist is likely to give you between 20 minutes and a couple of hours with the machine. It may take a few sessions to get used to. TENS can be used for one hour on, one hour off, throughout day.

## How effective are TENS machines?

TENS machines are used all over the world to reduce pain and muscle spasms. Some people find them very helpful, while others do not. Try out a TENS machine with your physiotherapist first to see if it will help. Some people have short-lived relief, but others find the effects last for longer. TENS machines vary in quality. If you find that one produces a sharp or spiky feeling, try a different brand or go to a different company.

TENS treatment should be part of an overall strategy for dealing with your pain: relaxation techniques, exercise, medication and learning to pace your activities all play a large part in managing pain. Arthritis Care delivers courses that teach self-management and pain management techniques.

## How safe are TENS machines?

TENS has minimal risks or side effects if the following precautions are followed.

- Check with your doctor or physiotherapist to make sure that using a TENS machine is a safe option for you.

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- Do not use a TENS machine if you have a pacemaker or other implanted electrical device, or if you are in the early stages of pregnancy.
- Do not place the electrodes over the carotid artery in your neck, around your mouth, over areas of numbness or irritated skin. If your skin is irritated when you remove the electrodes, change the position the next time you use TENS. If soreness persists, contact your GP or the person who you got the machine from.
- Do not use TENS when driving or using machinery.
- Some people may develop a skin reaction to a particular adhesive tape or gel. If this happens, stop using TENS and ask your doctor, physiotherapist or pharmacist for alternative ideas.
- If you intend to use TENS when flying, inform the airline first.

Since June 1998 TENS machines must be marked with a European stamp of safety (CE mark).

## How can I obtain a TENS machine?

If you feel that you are benefiting from the treatment sessions with your physiotherapist you might be able to borrow a machine from your local physiotherapy department for a while. If TENS helps you, it could be worth buying a TENS machine for home use. Before purchasing one, make sure the company will give you a refund within a certain time period if you find the TENS machine does not help you (as long as the machine is in new condition). TENS equipment is normally exempt from VAT as long as you sign the exemption declaration form before purchase (usually provided by the supplier).

Companies selling TENS machines are listed below. Please note, inclusion on this list does not imply a recommendation by Arthritis Care and neither is the list comprehensive. It is provided for ease of reference only (details correct at time of going to print).

Before you buy a machine, ask to be shown how to use it and where to put the electrodes.

### Boots

Boots Customer Care, PO Box 5300, Nottingham, NG90 1AA  
Tel: 0845 070 8090 (general) or 0845 609 0055  
[www.boots.com](http://www.boots.com)

Boots offer the TENS Unit at £35.74 and other TENS units (only available online).

### Lloyds Pharmacy

Lloydspharmacy Limited, Sapphire Court, Walsgrave Triangle, Coventry, CV2 2TX  
Online orders: 0845 600 3565  
[www.lloydspharmacy.co.uk](http://www.lloydspharmacy.co.uk)

Lloyds offer a range of TENS units from £15.00.

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## **Body Clock Health Care**

108 George Lane, South Woodford London E18 1AD

Tel: 020 8532 9595

Email: [help@bodyclock.co.uk](mailto:help@bodyclock.co.uk)

[www.bodyclock.co.uk](http://www.bodyclock.co.uk)

Body Clock offers a range of TENS machines, from £24.95 to £129.95.

## **Mobilis Rolyan**

Nunn Brook Road, Huthwaite, Sutton-in-Ashfield, Notts NG17 2HU

Tel: 0845 873 0035

Email: [mobilisrolyan.sales@patterson-medical.com](mailto:mobilisrolyan.sales@patterson-medical.com)

[www.neenhealth.com](http://www.neenhealth.com)

Mobilis offer TENS machines from £36.39 inc. p&p (VAT exempt)

VAT exemption declaration form can be supplied.

## **Nidd Valley Medical**

Unit 22 Claro Court, Claro Road, Harrogate, HG1 4BA

Tel: 01423 817920

Email: [sales@niddvalley.co.uk](mailto:sales@niddvalley.co.uk)

[www.tens.net](http://www.tens.net)

Nidd Valley Medical offer TENS machines from £34 plus p&p.

## **Polygon-Direct Ltd**

Polygon House, 93 New Court way, Ormskirk Business Park, Ormskirk, Lancashire, L39 2YT

Tel: 0845 287 6240

Email: [info@polygondirect.com](mailto:info@polygondirect.com)

[www.polygondirect.com](http://www.polygondirect.com)

Polygondirect offer a multi-function TENS machine (SR-591) for £34.99.

## **Tesco**

Tesco Customer Service, PO BOX 73, Baird Avenue, Dryburgh Industrial Estate, Dundee, DD1 9NF

Tel: 0845 600 4411

<http://direct.tesco.com>

Tesco offer TENS machines from £14.98 with free delivery.

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## Where can I get more information and support?

**Arthritis Care** is the UK's largest charity working with and for all people who have arthritis.

We are here to help you make positive choices through our information, website, self-management training, and professional helpline. Call the free helpline for confidential support on 0808 800 4050 (10am-4pm weekdays) or email: [Helplines@arthritiscare.org.uk](mailto:Helplines@arthritiscare.org.uk)

You can find support from others with arthritis by joining our online discussion forums.

We rely on donations to fund our vital work in supporting people living with arthritis. If you would like to make a contribution, please phone us on 020 7380 6540 or you can donate online.

**[www.arthritiscare.org.uk](http://www.arthritiscare.org.uk)**

**Our factsheets are reviewed every 18 months. Please check our website for up-to-date information and reference sources or call 020 7380 6577.**

*Last reviewed: June 2011*

### **Note**

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## Contact us

For confidential information and support about treatments, available care and adapting your life, contact the Arthritis Care Helpline

**Freephone: 0808 800 4050**

10am-4pm (weekdays)

Email: [Helplines@arthritiscare.org.uk](mailto:Helplines@arthritiscare.org.uk)

For information about Arthritis Care and the services we offer, contact us at: **[www.arthritiscare.org.uk](http://www.arthritiscare.org.uk)**

You can also talk to other people who are living with arthritis, through the discussion forums on our website.

### **Arthritis Care UK office and England regional services:**

Tel: 020 7380 6500

**Central England email:** [CentralEngland@arthritiscare.org.uk](mailto:CentralEngland@arthritiscare.org.uk)

**North England email:** [NorthEngland@arthritiscare.org.uk](mailto:NorthEngland@arthritiscare.org.uk)

**South England email:** [SouthEngland@arthritiscare.org.uk](mailto:SouthEngland@arthritiscare.org.uk)

### **Arthritis Care in Northern Ireland**

Tel: 028 9078 2940

Email: [Nireland@arthritiscare.org.uk](mailto:Nireland@arthritiscare.org.uk)

### **Arthritis Care in Scotland**

Tel: 0141 954 7776

Email: [Scotland@arthritiscare.org.uk](mailto:Scotland@arthritiscare.org.uk)

### **Arthritis Care in Wales**

Tel: 029 2044 4155

Email: [Wales@arthritiscare.org.uk](mailto:Wales@arthritiscare.org.uk)