

# TENS machines – an electronic method of pain relief

## What is TENS?

Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) is a treatment that administers mild electrical currents to the skin to relieve pain. A small, lightweight, hand-held, battery operated device produces the electrical currents and lead wires send these currents to self-adhesive electrode pads that attach to your skin. While using a TENS machine, you will experience a non-painful tingling or buzzing sensation and this can help to block or suppress pain messages.

Two electrode pads are usually positioned either side of the area of most intense pain. This is so that the TENS sensation covers the painful area. Four electrode pads can be used to treat a larger area of 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. Normally, you would adjust the strength of the current until the tingling sensation from TENS is strong but not painful. You will also be able to adjust the pattern and speed of the current so that the TENS sensation is as comfortable as possible. Many TENS machines are digital now and have helpful pre-sets to help you choose the best settings for your pain.

## How can I try a TENS machine?

TENS can be bought without prescription at pharmacies and via the internet. It is usually best to ask your doctor to refer you to a physiotherapist to try TENS first. Your physiotherapist will be able to show you how to use TENS properly and will get you to try TENS for a few hours a day until you get used to it. After this you will be encouraged to use TENS regularly throughout the day whenever you need pain relief. This is because the effects of TENS can be short-lived, although sometimes TENS effects can last for hours after use. TENS is safe so you can use it as much as you like although it is good practice to take regular 10 minute breaks from TENS every hour or so. Some people use TENS for more than 5 hours a day.

## How effective are TENS machines?

TENS machines are used all over the world to reduce pain. Some people find them very helpful, while others do not – just like other pain relieving treatments. 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.

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- Check with your doctor or physiotherapist to make sure that using a TENS machine is a safe option for you.
- Do not use a TENS machine if you have a pacemaker or other implanted electrical device
- You should check with your physiotherapist that TENS is a safe option for your pain if you have epilepsy, deep-vein thrombosis, heart problems, cancer or skin that is numb, irritated or fragile. TENS can be used if you have these conditions but you must seek advice from your physiotherapist or GP first.
- Normally you can use TENS during early pregnancy providing it is not delivered over the abdomen or lower back. Again you must check with your physiotherapist or GP that TENS is a safe option for your situation .
- Never place the electrodes over the front of your neck, over your eyes, directly on your head or within your mouth.
- Do not use TENS when driving, using machinery, sleeping, or in the bath/shower.
- Your skin may become slightly red and itchy when you remove the electrodes but this should disappear quickly. It is important to monitor your skin regularly after using TENS to ensure it remains healthy.
- If redness, itchiness and soreness persist and become bothersome then contact your physiotherapist, GP or pharmacist for advice. Some people develop a more serious skin reaction to TENS and may need to temporarily stop using TENS to let your skin recover.
- 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 (CEmark).

## How can I obtain a TENS machine?

If you feel that you may benefit from TENS you might be able to borrow a machine from your local physiotherapy department for a while. It may be worth buying a TENS machine for home use. It is useful to try TENS first under the guidance of a physiotherapist if at all possible. Before purchasing a TENS machine, 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 machines do not vary too much in quality. In the first instance it may be prudent to purchase a relatively simple inexpensive device. 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). TENS machines can be purchased from reputable companies.

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

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## **Body Clock Health Care**

108 George Lane, South Woodford London E18 1AD

Tel: 020 8532 9595 Freepone: 0500 220 0061

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.

## **Patterson Medical**

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

Tel: 0845 873 0035

Web based email: [www.pattersonmedical.co.uk/app.aspx?cmd=contact\\_us](http://www.pattersonmedical.co.uk/app.aspx?cmd=contact_us)

Patterson Medical offer a range of TENS machines

## **Nidd Valley Medical**

38 Woolmer Way, Bordon, Hants. GU36 9QF

Tel: 01420 487501

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

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

Nidd Valley Medical offer TENS machines from £29 plus p&p.

## **Polygon-Direct Ltd**

8-10 Radcliffe Road, West Bridgford, West Nottingham, NG2 5PW

Tel: 0333 700 1966

Web based email: [www.polygondirect.co.uk/contact-us.php](http://www.polygondirect.co.uk/contact-us.php)

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

Polygondirect offer a multi-function TENS machine (SR-591) for £16.65 plus VAT and p&p.

## **Tesco**

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

Tel: 0800 505555

[www.tesco.com/direct](http://www.tesco.com/direct)

Tesco offer TENS machines from £14.98 with free delivery.

## **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 TENS Units from £19.99 online .



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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 (09:30-17:00 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.



Arthritis Care and Arthritis Research UK have joined together to help more people live well with arthritis. Read how at [arthritisresearchuk.org/merger](http://arthritisresearchuk.org/merger). All donations will now go to Arthritis Research UK and be used to help people with arthritis live full and active lives in communities across England and Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Registered Charity Number 207711, SC041156.

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

**Our factsheets are reviewed every 3 years. Please check our website for up-to-date information and reference sources or call 020 7380 6577.**

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### Note

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## Contact us

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

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### 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)

Arthritis Care is now a certified member of The Information Standard. This means that you can be confident that Arthritis Care is a reliable and trustworthy source of health and social care information.

