

# One Handed Techniques for people with upper limb amputations or limb loss

## How to manage Activities of Daily Living

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Dorset Prosthetic Centre - [Patient information](#)

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### Introduction:

The aim of this leaflet is to provide some useful tips and advice on managing tasks one handed with the aim of increasing your ability to function more independently at home.

Whether or not you have chosen to use an upper limb prosthesis, or wear one for specific tasks only, this information should assist you in undertaking everyday activities more easily.

In time you will develop your own methods of coping and adapt these ideas - these are just a starting point.

Your occupational therapist (OT) is able to offer support, advice and practical strategies for coping. They can provide advice on the completion of activities and tasks and help you avoid overuse injuries and compensatory movements, reducing musculoskeletal impact on the remaining arm, joints, shoulder and back, not just in the short term, but also for the years ahead.

### How will I manage if my remaining arm is my non dominant side?

If your remaining arm is your non-dominant arm you will need to take time to adapt to this change. The non-dominant hand needs to be trained to compensate for this. You may want to consider obtaining items that are especially manufactured for left or right hand use- e.g. left handed scissors.

### Body posture and pacing

It is important to plan and organise how you will achieve tasks to make difficult tasks easier to manage. Before beginning, decide where to stand or sit and what area of your body you need to use to support the object. Be aware that using your body or joints in different ways may seem easier at the time, but may use muscles that wouldn't usually be used in this way. This can lead to compensatory movements and overuse of muscles that can cause pain in the future.

Consider breaking tasks down into smaller chunks and take frequent breaks. If you start to develop pain then contact your GP or OT at the Dorset Prosthetics Centre.

### Methods

Trialling different techniques and ways of doing things until you find something that works best for you will help you maximise your independence for the long term.

It can be helpful to talk to your OT about the activities you would normally do in your everyday life and concerns that you may have, so they can help you find strategies to manage these.

This guide suggests a variety of techniques, adaptations and aids that will be useful in the short and long term.

At the Dorset Prosthetic Centre, we have a variety of the aids that have been discussed above and can be demonstrated by your OT.

If you have any of your own useful ideas, please let us know so that we can help someone else to be more independent.

## How do I decide how much help I need?

Everyone is different and it is entirely up to you whether you work towards being independent or accept help or use equipment/aids.

You may find your amputation affects your self-confidence as well as your physical abilities. Although it is possible to do the majority of activities one handed, it can be frustrating to learn to do this. It can mean changing strategies and maybe accepting some help from relatives, friends, carers, occupational therapists and other health professionals.

## What can I do to help myself become more independent?

### Personal activities of daily living

#### Dressing

- Always dress your amputated side first and undress it last.
- It's easier to wear elasticated garments, e.g. Lycra, elastane, knitwear, rather than clothes with zips and other fastenings.
- Garments with raglan sleeves (where the seam goes from under the arm to the neck in a diagonal line) are easier to put on and take off.
- Try to choose clothes with large enough buttons to manage or those that can be adapted with Velcro fastenings.
- When putting on a top, lay it on your knees front down with the neck furthest from your body and the sleeves hanging down outside of each leg. Pull the sleeve up past the elbow towards the top of your arm, put your remaining arm into the other sleeve and pull the garment over your head.
- Partially fastened garments are easier to step into or pull over head.
- Fit zips with a small keyring or zip puller, allowing a finger to hook through and pull the zip up or down.
- Partially button up shirts, and then put on as you would a t-shirt. A 'button hook' can be purchased commercially. This is a device to hook the button through the button hole if dexterity is a problem. Alternatively buttons with a shank are easier to manage.
- Alternatively replace the buttons with Velcro or magnetic fastenings.
- Wear loose fitting clothes without tight cuffs if they are to be worn over a prosthesis.
- Shirt cuff buttons especially on unaffected side - use expanding cufflinks or a loop of elastic between the buttonholes to allow the cuff to expand to fit the remaining arm and also the prosthesis through.
- Consider getting the sleeves of your shirts and/or blouses taken up permanently to the length of your residual limb ('little arm' or 'stump') to ensure that the loose sleeve doesn't get in the way. Some patients have had their tops taken up by a tailor at reasonable costs and found it much easier.
- Ties - secure the narrow end firmly (for example in a drawer of a suitable height or between your knees). This will provide the necessary tension. Wrap the tie round in the normal manner. Alternatively buy a clip on tie.

- When fastening a bra, swivel your bra fastening round to the front to make it easier to do up, or purchase a front fastening bra. Alternatively purchase a crop top/sports bra without fastenings. You can also adapt bras by having D-ring fastenings with Velcro loops. There is a gadget called a 'bra angel' that can be purchased if needed.
- It can be difficult to pull trousers up fully over the hip on the affected side. Hook and eye fastenings may be easier, or buttons on a shank are easier to manage.
- Wear buckle or velcro fastening shoes. If choosing Velcro fastenings, check the 'hook' side regularly and 'de-fluff' as this does alter the effectiveness. There are a variety of alternatives for shoelaces such as 'Zubits', 'Lock Laces' and 'Hickies'. You can look up elasticated shoe laces on Google search. Elasticated laces allow the shoe to be slipped on and off.
- If you prefer ordinary laces it is possible to tie a lace one handed using a different method. Ask your OT for a diagram on how this is done, or there are useful YouTube videos. It does, however, take time to master this.
- Use a shoe horn if necessary.

## Examples



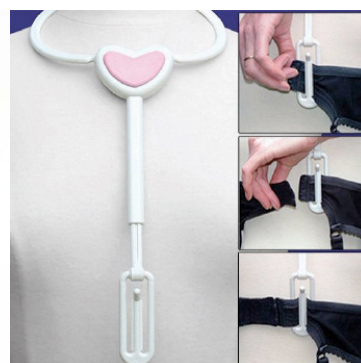
Button hook



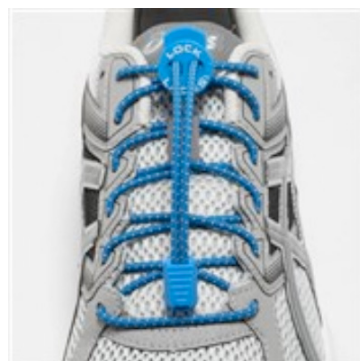
Zip puller



Button with shank



Bra Angel



Lock laces



Zubits - magnetic clips



Hickies -  
no tie silicone laces



Long handled shoe horn  
and dressing stick

## Personal care tasks

- Use pump action soap, an automatic soap dispenser, squeeze shower gel on a hook, or a soap mitt.
- Ensure you have a non slip mat in your shower/bath as you won't have both your arms to steady you if needed.
- It can be difficult to get out the bath one handed so discuss this with your OT if at all concerned. Showering is usually easier. You may feel you need a shower seat or grab rails to support you.
- Use a sponge rather than a flannel or a flannel mitt with soap placed inside it.
- To wring out a flannel, wrap it around the stem of the tap and twist.
- Use a long handled back brush, long handled sponge, or loofah to help reach your back and hard to reach areas such as underarms.

- To wash the functional arm fully, place a flannel over the side of the bath or across your knee and rub your arm on it.
- Etac Shower Sandal is a brush suctioned to the floor to assist washing feet.
- Wear a towelling dressing gown after you have washed or showered so that you do not have to dry hard to reach places.
- Sew a loop onto the middle of one short end of a bath towel. Fix a hook at a convenient height on the door/wall and place the loop over the hook. Use your remaining arm to use the now anchored towel.

## Examples



Automatic soap dispenser



Long handled sponge



Etac Shower sandal

## Toileting

- Position the toilet roll holder on the side of your functional arm if possible. If unable to fix to a wall, have a free standing toilet roll holder.
- Put your forefinger and thumb on either side of the paper by the perforation line and use your thumb to pierce the perforation line.
- At home it may be easier to keep a box of tissues or unscented wet wipes next to the toilet.
- Tear off toilet paper before you sit down or use a toilet roll holder with a flap.



## Grooming

- Use a toothpaste dispenser or pump action toothpaste dispenser. Invest in an electric toothbrush if the action of brushing is difficult.
- Squeeze toothpaste directly into your mouth and then brush your teeth.
- Soak dentures first. To brush them sit down, place a towel on your lap and place your dentures between your knees. Brush using a toothbrush and slowly rotate the dentures until they are clean, or use a one handed suction denture brush or suction nail brush.
- Use a long handled hairbrush.
- Hairdryer clamps that attach to the wall or are desk mounted are available commercially. Some patients have found that clamping the hairdryer in a drawer works well.
- Use a lightweight or travel hairdryer.
- The '1-up' hair tie allows a ponytail to be completed one handed.



- When filing nails, secure the file board under a weight, or with blue tack, or under your thigh.
- Use a suction nail brush.
- Consider a one handed nail clipper.

## Examples



Toothpaste dispenser

Denture brush

Hairdryer clamp

Suction nail brush

## Productivity

### Eating

- Use a non-slip mat such as dycem matting, to keep the plate still.
- Use a bowl with a raised edge or plate guard to avoid food falling off the side of the plate. Consider adapted cutlery which are combined such as a 'Splayed' (fork, knife and spoon in one), 'Nelson knife' or 'Knork'. Camping outlets may also sell combined cutlery.
- A knife can be purchased with a curved blade that cuts food using a rocker action. This prevents the food from moving around the plate. This is especially useful when cutting meat.
- Use single button press salt and pepper grinders or use shakers instead of grinders.
- Suction egg cups are available.

## Examples



High sided plate

Eg of Fork and knife combined

Non slip matting

Silicone Eazy Hold cuffs

# Food preparation

## Tins

- There are commercially available electric and wall mounted tin openers that are designed for one handed use with a one touch button.
- Use cans with ring pull openings steadying them between your knees or with a belly clamp.
- Ask a friend, relative or carer to open tins and place contents into an airtight container.

## Opening jars/bottles

- Stabilise the jar by placing between your knees, between a drawer, or by using a belly clamp or 'spill not' jar opener.
- Stabilise the jar or bottle on non-slip matting or use a jelly mould to grip the jar lid.
- Use a 'ring pull can opener' for easier release of the ring pull.
- Ask a friend, relative or carer to loosen the lids on jars/containers that you use frequently.
- Buy press button top opening airtight storage containers.

## Preparing vegetables

- There are some boards commercially available with spikes to stabilise vegetables during preparation. These are not suitable for people with sensation loss or visual problems.
- You may find it easier to use frozen vegetables or vegetable and rice pouches that are cooked in the microwave.
- If cooking vegetables on the hob, it may be helpful to put them into a wire chip basket then into the saucepan, this will mean you do not need to drain them afterwards.
- Use a steamer to cook vegetables
- A food processor can be used for slicing and grating food.
- A suction pan holder will secure a saucepan to stop it rotating when stirring.

Use a wire mash cooking basket to cook and strain vegetables, pasta etc. which will eliminate the need to lift and drain a pan of boiling water.

## Examples



Ring puller



Jelly mould



Wire chip basket



Pan holder

## Buttering bread/toast

- You can purchase a 'buttering board', which stops bread moving, or a non-slip mat may be used.

### Examples



One handed can opener



Belly clamp



Spill not can holder



Butter board  
and vegetable spike

## Oven cooking and taking items out of the oven

- Cook food in individual portions if possible and avoid heavy dishes.
- Extension rails can assist removing items from the oven as they extend out beyond the oven to allow for basting and lifting hot dishes, making it safer to use. View a YouTube video by typing 'Oven telescopic flexi rails'.

### Example



## Carrying food and other items

- You may find it difficult to move food, drinks or other items from room to room. There are single handed trays, or a kitchen trolley may be suitable.
- A table and chair in the kitchen, or a high stool for use at work surfaces to consume meals or drinks reduces the need to carry them any distance.
- Purchase a travel kettle as this is small and light, or use a plastic jug to fill your kettle.
- A kettle tipper may prove easier to manage.

### Examples



One handed tray/  
free hand tray



Kettle tipper

## Washing up

- Use a dishwasher or a dish-mop/brush suctioned to the side of the sink.
- To wring out a dish cloth, place around the stem of the tap and twist.

## Laundry

- Duvet clips or cloths pegs can be used to help put covers on one handed
- Use a shopping basket on wheels or 'washing wheels'.
- Have your clothes line lower than it previously was.
- Choose equipment for ironing carefully. Useful items are a lightweight iron or a steam iron where the flex comes from the midpoint rather than from one side.
- Use dressmaker's pins to anchor slippery or difficult material.
- You may find it easier to iron larger items on a blanket covered table top rather than an ironing board.
- Ironing boards can be difficult and heavy to handle. If your house has sufficient room, it is worth considering a wall mounted board.

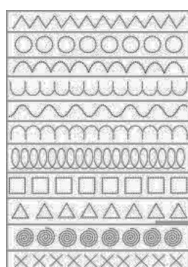
## Meal delivery

- Ask your OT for information on hot or frozen meals you can get delivered to your home.

## Technology

### Writing

- To anchor the paper, use a clip board, place on non-slip matting, use a paper weight, or use a pad where paper will peel off rather than a single sheet.
- To use a ruler, put a small piece of blue tack at each end to prevent movement. Linex rulers with either one or two rubber strips incorporated at manufacture can be bought at most art or office outlets.
- Practice is needed. Start with patterns flowing across the page, changing direction and then progress to letters.



### Reading

- Use pillows or a 'bookseat' to assist holding books.
- Use rubber bands around each half of the book to keep the pages open. As you read, slide the next page under the rubber band.
- An electronic reading tablet is easier to read from than a book



Book seat



## Keyboard/computer

The computer can also be adapted in a number of ways using 'in built' accessibility settings. The 'My Computer My Way' website from AbilityNet covers a range of options, for example filtering key presses or changing the mouse pointer, on screen keyboard with predictive text and voice recognition.

## Telephone

- Place the telephone on non-slip matting to prevent it slipping.
- Keep a note pad of paper on a clipboard next to the phone for messages.
- Consider a telephone with a loud speaker facility leaving your hands free, or alternatively a headsets.

## Mobile phones

There are a number of different applications that can be used through the settings within the phone eg Siri function, ability to record to speech for texts, Swiftkeyflow allow you to draw from letter to letter to write a sentence.

## Miscellaneous

### Medication

- Ask your chemist for easy to open containers.
- Alternatively, ask the chemist or a carer/friend to put your tablets in a weekly pill dispenser or dosette box.

### Knocking in a nail

- Place a piece of blue tack where the nail is required.
- Press the nail into the centre.
- Knock in with a hammer, removing the blue tack before the nail is driven firmly in.

## Am I able to return to driving?

Firstly, you must inform the DVLA of your change of circumstances before you return to driving.

**[www.gov.uk/report-driving-medical-condition](http://www.gov.uk/report-driving-medical-condition)** or telephone **0300 790 6806**

They may request further information from your doctor and request you have a driving assessment at a Driving Assessment Centre where you will have the opportunity to trial cars with driving adaptations. The most local centre is Wessex Driveability at Southampton

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

You can be fined up to a £1000 if you don't report a change in circumstances to the DVLA that may affect your driving.

You will also need to inform your insurance of your change of circumstances and also if you have any modifications to your car. Under the Disability Discriminations Act it is illegal for insurance companies to increase your premium based on your disability.

Discuss what modifications you may need with your occupational therapist (OT). The majority of people with upper limb amputations will be able to return to driving with minimal adaptations e.g. a steering wheel ball.

Ask for the Dorset Prosthetic Centre leaflet – Advice for amputees returning to driving.

## Equipment provision for small aids and devices.

There are many gadgets and aids on the market that are sold to help 'disabled people'. Do not be tempted to buy each one you see as not everything will suit your needs, also the price can be very variable dependent on the supplier so is worth Googling other suppliers before buying. Many of the items discussed above can be purchased in ordinary retail stores. Some may be available through your local adult social care.

Choose carefully after discussion with your occupational therapist.

YouTube is also a good source of information about how other amputees may have overcome some of the practical problems.

**www.nrshealthcare.co.uk** Tel **0245 121 8111**

**www.otstores.co.uk** Tel **0845 260 7061**

**www.completecareshop.co.uk** Tel **03330 160 000**

**www.lakeland.co.uk** Tel **0345 389 6255**

If you are replacing equipment or clothing, think carefully about which design will offer you most benefit. At the end of the day it is 'ability' that counts, not 'disability'.

## Contact details

If you feel you would like any specific advice, have any queries regarding managing at home or want to give tips for other patients, please contact Joanne Teanby, occupational therapist, Dorset Prosthetics Centre. Telephone: **0300 019 4363**

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