

# The phantom in the body

The idea of the virtual body



**P**hantom limb pain is the experience of pain in a body part that does not exist. Seventy percent of people who lose a limb experience a phantom limb. It's not all legs and arms either. Phantom breasts, penises and tongues have been reported.<sup>eg.44</sup> We believe that all pain sufferers could benefit from knowing more about phantom pain.

The feelings in a phantom limb are completely real. It can itch, tingle and hurt. Like other pains, phantom pain worsens when the person becomes stressed. The symptoms worsen when someone comes close to where the body part would have been, some feel morning stiffness in phantom joints.<sup>45</sup> Others have reported feeling rings on phantom fingers, old surgery sites, and hands still clenched as though on a motorbike handlebar. Some report phantom legs that 'can't stop walking'.

Pain after amputation is usually more severe if there was pain before amputation.<sup>46</sup> This is a type of pain memory.

Phantom limb pain tells us about the representation or map of the limb (the 'virtual limb') inside the brain. In fact, the brain holds many virtual bodies. Our virtual bodies let us know where our actual body is in space. Try closing your eyes and reaching for a cup. You can still do it because your brain uses the virtual body to know where the real body is. In phantoms, although the leg is missing, the virtual leg and the relationship of the leg to the rest of the body is still represented in the brain.