

Fact Sheet #7

Prosthetic appearance and cosmetic covers



Everyone feels differently about the changes which have occurred to their body following an amputation. Some people find it hard to look at and/or even touch their residual limb (stump) in the early days. Some people also struggle to look at their prosthesis (artificial limb). Whereas others adjust quite quickly to the changes with their body. It is important to be honest about how you're feeling and seek help early if you have any concerns about your appearance, especially if you are finding it difficult to accept the changes.

This Fact Sheet explores appearance of your prosthesis and the cosmetic covers (cosmesis) available to you.

What is a cosmesis?

How a prosthesis will look is more important to some people than it is to others. The look of a prosthesis is called its 'cosmesis'. You should think about how important the cosmesis is to you and talk to your Prosthetist about it, as it might change the parts of the prosthesis selected for you.

What is a non-functional prosthesis?

Some people who do not wear a functional prosthesis (ie. don't wear a working prosthetic leg or arm) may prefer to wear a non-functional lightweight prosthesis which is purely for cosmetic purposes. This type of prosthesis won't allow you to use it to undertake activities but it will help to fill out clothing and basically hide the fact that you have a missing limb. Talk to your medical team if you would like to consider a prosthesis for cosmetic purposes only.

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What are cosmetic covers?

Cosmetic covers (cosmesis) sit over all the parts between the socket and the end of the prosthesis (foot or hand). For example, someone with a below-knee amputation may have a cosmetic cover placed from the foot to the knee area.

Cosmetic cover options include:

- Foam cover. This is the most common option. It is a dense foam which is hollow on the inside to fit over the parts of your prosthesis (such as the pylon and socket) and then shaped on the outside to match your other limb. It is usually covered with a stocking or a sock once finished.
- Silicone Skin. A tight material which fits over the foam cover that can be worn instead of a stocking or sock. With this option it is possible to replicate colouring, nails, hairs and other features to match your other limb.
- 3D printed clip on cover. A light-weight metallic looking option which can be worn over the pylon (of below-knee prosthesis) or over the knee/pylon (of an above-knee prosthesis).
- 'Commando'. Going 'commando' is a term commonly used when people prefer no cover at all.

Advantages of a cosmesis:

- It can keep dirt out of the prosthesis, provide protection from knocks and help to keep parts of the prosthesis functioning well.
- It can hide parts of the prosthesis from view if that is what you prefer.
- It allows the area between the socket and the end of the prosthesis to be shaped to closely match your remaining limb.
- It can fill out clothing better than a prosthesis without a cover, often making the prosthesis less noticeable.

Disadvantages of a cosmesis:

- It can make it harder to get to the parts of the prosthesis to fix problems and/or adjustments if required.
- It can make the prosthesis slightly heavier.
- It can sometimes get caught in and/or affect the ideal function of moving prosthetic parts (eg. knee unit).
- Custom-made 'skin', which is matched to your features, can be more expensive than other cosmesis and the cost may not be covered and become an 'out-of-pocket' expense.

What is a socket?

Your socket is made just for you, as it is fitted to your stump via a suspension system. It will never fit anyone else, so you have options to make it your own. Socket options include:

- Selecting a socket in a colour you prefer, whether it is one single colour or many colours together.
- Choosing a picture that you like and having it laminated onto the socket.

Speak to your Prosthetist and ask about other ideas that you might have or would like to try.

What about my clothing?

Some people like to adjust their clothing to make life easier following their amputation, so think about whether there are changes which might help you. If you have had a lower limb amputation you may want to consider having zippers or Velcro sewed into the side of long pants so you can get to your prosthesis without having to pull your pants down. If you have had an arm amputation, you may want to consider removing and/or stitching together the end of long sleeves so they are not left 'dangling' when you are not wearing a prosthesis.

What about my footwear?

If you have had a lower limb amputation changing shoes may be difficult at times, but the following tips might help you when choosing and adjusting footwear.

- Depending on the prosthetic foot you have, it can be hard to get your shoes on and off. It is a good idea to have a shoe horn to help you do this and to always wear a sock to help slide your foot in and out of a shoe.
- Putting on boots, or anything higher than just below ankle height, can be hard due to the angles between the prosthetic foot and the rest of the prosthesis. For safety reasons it is a good idea to be sitting down when trying new footwear.
- Changing the heel height will change the alignment of your prosthesis. This means that you will not be able to walk as well and that it will feel like you are leaning slightly forward or backward. When you walk, it might seem like you are going up or down hill – this will not be comfortable and can be unsafe. It is important to think about the shoes you wear, the shoes you want to wear and discuss this with your Prosthetist.
- Try to find shoes that don't have slippery soles as you need footwear that you can rely on in all weather conditions.

When considering the shoes you will wear with your prosthesis it is critical that you try and think about the safety of your remaining foot. Ideally you want a supportive, well cushioned and well-fitting shoe, and your Prosthetist is qualified to help you select footwear if required.

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