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Information for patients Local Anaesthetic Nerve Blocks for Pain Relief



Hand and Upper Limb

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What is a Nerve Block?

The Anaesthetist will often use a nerve block as a way of providing you with pain relief, during or after surgery. It often works better than traditional pain killers such as morphine and does not have any of the unwanted side effects of morphine, such as nausea, vomiting, itchiness and sleepiness.

A nerve block means that you will have one or more injections of local anaesthetic around the nerves, which supply the part of your body that will be operated on.

This is similar to the way in which your dentist would numb part of your mouth before a filling, for example. Having a nerve block should reduce the amount of post-operative pain or discomfort you feel after your operation. However, as well as helping with pain, it also helps you to recover more quickly following your surgery.

How is the nerve block done?

Before your operation, your Anaesthetist will see you and explain how it is done. If you decide to have a nerve block it will be done in the anaesthetic room in theatre. Your Anaesthetist will locate the nerves, often by using an ultra sound machine, and then they will inject the local anaesthetic. Sometimes it is better for you if the Anaesthetist inserts a fine plastic tube alongside the nerve, so that more local anaesthetic can be given to you after your operation.

Risks, benefits and alternatives

As with any procedure, there are some small risks when a nerve block is done.

- There is a 1 in 5000 - 10000 risk of damage to the nerve, which would show as numbness or weakness in the muscle. Most people will make a full recovery after six to nine months.
- There is less than a 1 in 6000 chance that you will experience an allergy to the local anaesthetic that is used in the nerve block, which is treatable.
- In very rare cases, misplacement of the local anaesthetic in the block can cause temporary problems, such as breathing difficulties, which are again treatable.
- It is quite common to have some bruising or soreness around the area of the nerve block, but this should get better within a few weeks as with any other bruise.

Having a nerve block brings with it a number of benefits.

- There is often no need to have a general anaesthetic, so risks such as stroke, heart attack and blood clots are minimized.
- You will probably recover more quickly after your operation, particularly if you have not had a general anaesthetic.
- You do not get the feeling of sickness that can happen after a general anaesthetic or after taking strong painkillers
- The nerve block provides far better pain relief than tablets or medicines, and again without sickness and vomiting.
- It may be possible for you to watch some or all of your operation on the television screens in theatre, however this would only happen if you wanted to.

Will it hurt?

The nerve block is normally done after the area has been numbed with local anaesthetic. The procedure can cause some mild tingling, but you should not find it painful. If you do experience any discomfort, please tell your anaesthetist.

Will I still have a general anaesthetic?

In most cases, no. However, you may be offered some mild sedation, or a light general anaesthetic.

What will my arm feel like when the nerve block has been given?

Depending on the type of block you've had, you may find that part or all of the arm and hand is numb. You may also experience muscle weakness and an inability to move your arm while it is working - and then "pins and needles" as it wears off.

What if it doesn't work?

There are alternatives your Anaesthetist can use if the block fails. During your operation your Anaesthetist will be watching closely to make sure you are comfortable and give you extra painkillers if necessary.

Will my arm still be numb when I go home?

It is quite likely that you will be discharged home before the nerve block has worn off completely. To prevent injury to your arm, please remember to keep your arm in the sling at all times, until the numbness wears off, as you will not be able to move your arm normally.

Are there any particular precautions I should take?

- Do not drive for at least two full days after a block of this nature. Depending on the type of surgery, your surgeon may wish that you do not drive for up to eight weeks.
- It is also very important not to handle hot, cold or sharp objects as the loss of feeling could result in burns, scalding or cuts.
- Be careful when near radiators and heating devices.
- It is not unusual to have a red droopy eye on the side of the operation and a hoarse voice. These effects normally wear off within 24 hours.
- If you feel short of breath or suffer from chest pain which gets worse on taking deep breaths, you must seek medical help immediately. Things like this happen rarely and are treatable.

When should I start to take other painkillers?

Even though your nerve block may result in you experiencing no pain after surgery, it is important you still take your other prescribed painkillers regularly at the prescribed times. This will help to reduce the intensity of pain when the numbness wears off. Details of how to take these painkillers are given in the 'Pain Relief following Surgery' leaflet.