

Peripheral nerve block

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What is a peripheral nerve block?

A peripheral nerve block is an injection of local anaesthetic around a peripheral nerve.

Peripheral nerves supply sensation to a small, defined area of the skin and the underlying tissue. A local anaesthetic block of this nerve is used to treat pain in a specific area following an operation or injury.

Why is it needed?

The benefits of a nerve block include a shorter recovery period and better pain relief. This allows you to be mobile more quickly after your operation. You may not need as many strong pain-relieving medicines such as morphine. This will help reduce your risk of the side-effects associated with these medicines, which include nausea (feeling sick) and drowsiness.

What does it involve?

An anaesthetist will inject local anaesthetic into the area of skin surrounding the nerve in the area relating to your pain. This may be done whilst you are asleep or it may be performed while you are awake, either before or after your surgery.

Special preparations

There are no special preparations for the procedure but the anaesthetist will ensure that the area of skin to be injected is clean.

How will I feel during the procedure?

If you are awake you may feel a short, sharp pain as the needle is inserted and you may feel some pressure as the anaesthetist locates the exact spot to inject. You may also feel some sensations as the local anaesthetic is injected. Your anaesthetist will be able to tell you what to expect.

What to expect after a nerve block

Nerve blocks affect many types of nerves, including nerves that control movement, pain and normal sensation. Nerve blocks cause feelings such as:

- Numbness
- Tingling
- Heaviness
- Weakness or inability to move your arm or leg
- A feeling that your arm or leg has “fallen asleep”

A nerve block can last for two to 36 hours depending on the medication used. Usually the sensation of weakness wears off first followed by the tingling and heaviness. Finally you may start to notice pain. Keep in mind that this may occur in any order. Once a nerve block starts to wear off it is usually completely gone within 60 minutes.

Sometimes your anaesthetist may leave a small tube (or catheter) in position which can be used to “top-up” the injection which will prolong the duration of your pain relief. This tube will be removed before you go home.

What are the risks?

Nerve blocks are very safe. There may be specific risks or side-effects with a particular type of nerve block, which can be discussed with your anaesthetist prior to surgery.

However, all nerve blocks may cause:

- Inadequate pain relief (1 in 100) – additional medications are always available
- Bleeding or bruising around the injection site
- Infection at the injection site
- Accidental injection of local anaesthetic into a blood vessel (a very rare but potentially serious complication)
- Nerve damage
 - Permanent nerve damage due to a nerve block is very rare (1 in 5,000 to 1 in 10,000) and this risk is no greater than that associated with a general anaesthetic
 - Prolonged numbness (longer than 48 hours) occasionally occurs (less than 1 in 100) – the vast majority of patients (95 to 97%) recover full sensation within four to six weeks (99% will be better within a year)

The benefits of any procedure should always be balanced against the risks and alternatives. Your anaesthetist will help you with this.

Aftercare

After a nerve block, you cannot feel pain, pressure or extremes in temperature. Because your limb is numb, it is at greater risk of injury. It is therefore important to protect the limb by immobilisation, such as a sling for an arm, and proper positioning. If you have had a leg block, you are advised to seek assistance with mobilisation. While you are awake, change position of your arm or leg often. This helps to avoid putting too much pressure on the limb for long periods of time.

Pain medication

Before the nerve block wears off completely, it is important to start taking regular pain medication to sustain your pain relief. Remember to take this throughout the day and night so you do not wake up in pain.

Further information about your peripheral nerve block

The following nerve block was performed for your surgery:

If you have any further questions about this procedure, please ask your nurse or doctor to contact one of the Acute Pain Team for you. If you are at home, please contact your GP. The team is available on Monday to Friday, between 8am and 4pm.

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) ensures that the NHS listens to patients, relatives, carers and friends, answers questions and resolves concerns as quickly as possible. If you have a query or concern call 01271 314090 or e-mail: ndht.pals@nhs.net. You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at North Devon District Hospital, Barnstaple.

Have your say

Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust aims to provide high quality services. However, please tell us when something could be improved. If you have a comment or compliment about a service or treatment, please raise your comments with a member of staff or the PALS team in the first instance.

'Care Opinion' comments forms are on all wards or online at www.careopinion.org.uk.

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