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Having Your Operation Under Regional Anaesthesia (Nerve Block)

Issued by the Department of Anaesthesia

Introduction

Before you have your operation you will need an anaesthetic. In the past, this meant that people usually had a general anaesthetic. Having a general anaesthetic is when you are fully asleep or “knocked out” during surgery. However, nowadays most operations on the limbs can be done safely without the need to be asleep at all. This method is called regional anaesthesia.

What is regional anaesthesia?

Regional anaesthesia is when a numbing medicine (local anaesthetic) is injected near to your nerves to block pain signals being carried to the brain from different parts of the body.

A peripheral nerve block (or simply, “block”) is when the local anaesthetic is injected near to the nerves of either your arm or leg. Because the pain signals are blocked by the local anaesthetic injection, a block can be used for your surgery on its own while you remain fully awake. Some patients prefer not to be fully awake during their surgery and in these cases a nerve block can usually be given safely along with sedation (using medicines to help you relax) or even with a general anaesthetic (being fully asleep or “knocked out”).

For arm operations the injection may be given either in the side of your neck, near your collarbone or armpit, at your elbow or in/around your forearm, wrist or fingers. For leg operations the injection may be given near to your groin, behind your knee or thigh or around your ankle, foot or toes.

What are the benefits?

There are a number of advantages to having regional anaesthesia for your surgery:

- You can avoid having a general anaesthetic completely.
- Better pain relief after surgery - depending on how much local anaesthetic has been given your pain relief can last between 4 and 24 hours.
- Less need for strong pain killers - taking strong pain killers after an operation can cause many patients to feel sickly (nauseated), drowsy or unsteady on their feet.
- Feeling better sooner and so beginning your recovery more quickly.

What should I expect?

Shortly after arrival in hospital you will be seen by your anaesthetist. They will review your medical history with you and discuss any health issues relevant to your operation. If a nerve block is appropriate for your surgery this choice will be discussed with you at this time. The information in this leaflet will help you make your decision about this. The consent form you sign for your surgery includes giving consent for your anaesthetic.

Your block will be performed by your anaesthetist in the theatre department (“the block room”). Before, during and after the block your vital signs (breathing, pulse and blood pressure etc) will be monitored.

A special needle is used to place the block and having it done usually feels no more painful than receiving a normal injection. To help put the local anaesthetic in the right place your anaesthetist will either use a nerve stimulator and/or an ultrasound scanner. A nerve stimulator uses a very small electrical current to cause slight tingle or twitch in the arm or leg to help locate the nerve. An ultrasound scanner uses sound waves to view the nerves and the injection directly.

Although a nerve block can be performed under general anaesthesia, doing so prevents you from giving us useful feedback as we work near your nerves. Placing the nerve block while you are awake adds an extra measure of safety to the procedure.

If you are worried about feeling pain during the nerve block make sure to tell your anaesthetist - they can then offer extra medicine to help you relax and be more comfortable.

After the nerve block has been placed successfully your anaesthetist and surgeon will both check to make sure you are comfortable before, during and after your operation.

What are the risks?

There are risks associated with both general and regional anaesthesia but serious problems with either are very uncommon. Nerve blocks are performed with great care and the risk of any patient suffering a serious complication is very small indeed.

Specific side-effects include:

- Temporary weakness of your muscles - the nerves which move your muscles are also affected by the local anaesthetic injection. As a result, your arm may have to be placed in a sling for safety/comfort or you may need crutches and/or a leg splint to aid safe mobility until the weakness resolves.
- Numbness/tingling lasting longer than 24 hours.

Specific complications include:

- Failure of the nerve block (between 1 in 10 and 1 in 50). In the unlikely event of this happening a different form of pain relief or anaesthetic will be given to you.
- Bleeding or infection at the site of injection is rare, as the nerve block is performed with care under sterile conditions.
- Adverse reactions to the local anaesthetic (very rare). Anaesthetists are specially trained to treat these conditions should they occur.
- Permanent nerve damage (extremely rare).

Additional information about what to expect from your nerve block will be provided by your anaesthetist on the day of surgery.

What happens afterwards?

Whilst your arm or leg is still numb it is important to keep it safe from harm. Make sure your clothing and bed clothes are not too tight around the limb. Take care not to bump your limb against furniture or door frames. Take particular care when handling hot drinks as accidentally spilling these on a numb arm/leg may cause a scald or burn.

Your nerve block should give you good pain relief for 4-24 hours. It is recommended that you start taking your pain medication before you begin to feel too much pain in the operative limb. On the day of surgery it is a good idea to take your pain medication before going to sleep that night. Thereafter, you will need to take regular pain medication as prescribed by your anaesthetist.

As the nerve block wears off you may experience tingling or “pins and needles” in the limb. This is usually short lasting and entirely normal.

If the numbness, tingling or weakness extends beyond 24 hours call **0344 811 8111** and ask to speak to the on call anaesthetist at the hospital where you had your operation.

Once normal sensations and movement have returned to your limb you may carefully resume normal activities.

Sources of information

Further information can be found at :**www.youranaesthetic.info**.

Alternative Formats

If you would like a copy of this information in large print, another language, audio tape or other format please call the Contact Centre on **03 44 811 8118**

Other sources of information

NHS 111

NHS Choices

www.nhs.uk/pages/homepage.aspx

NICE (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence)

www.nice.org.uk

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

Freephone: **0800 032 0202**

Text: 01670 511098

Email: northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk

Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust

General Enquiries **03 44 811 8111**

www.northumbria.nhs.uk

PIN 567/V2

Review date: June 2015

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