Your nerve block

Translations are available for this leaflet: **www.rcoa.ac.uk/translations**.

This leaflet explains what to expect if you are offered a nerve block for your operation. It has been written by anaesthetists, patients and patient representatives, working together.

Contents

This leaflet explains:

- what a nerve block is
- why you could benefit from having a nerve block for your operation
- how it works
- what happens after
- risk and shared decision-making.

What is a nerve block?

A nerve block is a type of regional anaesthetic. A regional anaesthetic makes a part of your body numb so that you do not feel pain during an operation. With a nerve block, you can stay awake during some operations.

Nerve blocks involve injecting local anaesthetic near a group of nerves to 'block' the pain signals and make the body part numb and sometimes immobile. They may be used on their own for some operations or with a general anaesthetic to provide pain relief during and after surgery.

Nerve blocks can be used for operations on the shoulder, chest, tummy, arm, hand, hip, knee, leg, ankle or foot.

What are the benefits of a nerve block

For some operations, a nerve block can provide very good pain relief during and after surgery, reducing the need for strong pain-relief medicines such as morphine or similar drugs, known as opioids. These medicines can have side effects including feeling sick, drowsiness and constipation. They can also cause addiction if used for a long period of time.

Depending on the type of nerve block, pain relief may last for several hours and sometimes up to 48 hours. Nerve blocks may also reduce your risk of developing chronic pain related to the operation.

In some cases, a nerve block can be used instead of a general anaesthetic. This may be useful for patients who have medical conditions that put them at higher risk from a general anaesthetic.

Can anyone have a nerve block?

Not everyone can have a nerve block. It is only appropriate for certain operations. More complex operations will require a general anaesthetic as well as a nerve block.

For some patients, a nerve block may not be possible or advisable.

A nerve block may not be suitable for you if:

- you are allergic to local anaesthetics
- you have an infection where the injection would be given
- you take blood-thinning drugs or your blood does not clot properly
- you already have nerve damage or altered sensation in the area where the nerve block would be used
- you would find it difficult to keep still while the injection is being given
- the nerve block is not suitable for the type of surgery that you are having.

Some medical conditions may affect whether a nerve block is suitable for you. Your anaesthetist will discuss this with you and help decide what is safest and best for you.

How is a nerve block done?

This section explains what usually happens if you are awake or sedated when your nerve block is given. If you are also having a general anaesthetic, your anaesthetist will explain when the nerve block will be given.

During your nerve block, you may be:

- fully awake
- sedated, with drugs that make you sleepy and relaxed. For more information about sedation, please see our Sedation explained leaflet: **www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/sedation-explained**.

Your anaesthetist will discuss with you which method might be best for you.

The following are usually the steps for having a nerve block.

- The anaesthetist will check the correct location of the operation and block with you before starting. This is a standard safety procedure.
- The anaesthetist or another healthcare professional will connect monitors to measure your heart rate, blood pressure and oxygen levels and any other equipment as required.
- A cannula, a thin plastic tube, is placed in a vein in your hand or arm for giving fluids and drugs that you may need.
- You will be helped into the right position for the nerve block.
- The area of the injection will be cleaned with antiseptic.
- A small injection of local anaesthetic may be given to numb the skin.
- The anaesthetist may use an ultrasound machine to help find the nerves and place the local anaesthetic in the right area.
- For some nerve blocks, the anaesthetist may need to adjust the position of the needle, so that the local anaesthetic reaches the right nerves. This can usually be done without the need for another injection.

- You will need to keep still while this is done. A few attempts may be required in some cases.
- Occasionally, a small plastic tube may be left near the nerves to give local anaesthetic for pain relief after the operation. This is called a catheter-based block.
- The anaesthetist will check the sensations that you can feel at different places. Surgery will not be allowed to start until the anaesthetist and you are happy that the block is working well.
- If the nerve block does not work well enough, your anaesthetist may offer more local anaesthetic or extra pain relief. Occasionally, if the area is not numb enough for the operation, you may need a general anaesthetic.
- A screen will usually be positioned so that you do not see the operation being performed.

What does it feel like?

You will briefly feel pressure and tingling when the local anaesthetic is injected into the skin. You may feel some pushing or tugging while the nerve block injection is given, but this should not usually be painful.

Occasionally, you may feel a sharp sensation, like an electric shock, or tingling in the part of your body being blocked. If this happens, tell your anaesthetist straight away.

The nerve block usually starts working gradually and usually takes 20–40 minutes to work fully. The part of your body being blocked may feel warm, tingly, heavy or numb, and you may not be able to move it properly for a while.

During the operation, you may feel some movement or pulling, but you should not feel pain. This is normal and does not mean that the nerve block is not working.

After the nerve block

The effect of the nerve block can last for up to 48 hours. During this time the body part that has been numbed may feel heavy and may need to be supported until your muscles start working again.

As the nerve block wears off, you may experience pins and needles in the blocked area. This is completely normal.

Recovering at home after a nerve block

Before being discharged, you will be given information to help your recovery at home. You should use any supports that you are given once back at home. This is because you will not have full sensation in the area of the surgery and it can be easier to get injured. You may need someone to help you carry out everyday tasks as you recover from the surgery.

- Take special care around heat sources, such as fires or radiators. You will not feel heat while the body part is numb and you may burn yourself.
- If you've had a block to your arm or shoulder, take extra care when using domestic appliances such as kettles, irons and cooking equipment.
- If you've had a block to your leg, take care when moving around.
- Start taking your pain-relief medicines before the block wears off and as instructed by the hospital. This is important because the effect of the nerve block can stop quite suddenly.

When to ask for help

You will need to seek help from the emergency medical services if:

- you notice unexplained breathlessness
- you experience severe pain that is not controlled by pain killers.

If the numbness and tingling in the blocked area is worsening, or if the block has not fully worn off two days after the operation, you should contact the anaesthetic department by calling the number given on your discharge paperwork.

The preoperative assessment clinic (preassessment)

If you are having a planned operation, you might be invited to a preoperative assessment clinic a few weeks or days before your surgery. Sometimes, for more minor surgery, a nurse will arrange a telephone call to go through some questions with you.

The preassessment team will ask about your general health, your medicines and any previous anaesthetics that you have had. If a nerve block is being considered, they may also ask about anything that could affect whether a nerve block is suitable for you. This may include your medicines, any blood-thinning drugs, allergies, infections and any existing numbness, tingling, weakness or nerve problems in the area where the nerve block may be used.

Please bring the following with you:

- a list of your current medicines or your medicines in their full packaging
- details of any medicines that you take to thin your blood, because these may need to be stopped or changed before surgery
- any information that you have about tests and treatments that you've had at other hospitals
- information about any problems that you or your family may have had with anaesthetics
- information about any existing nerve problems in the part of your body being operated on
- any recent blood pressure measurements.

You may meet an anaesthetist at the preassessment clinic. Otherwise, you will meet your anaesthetist in hospital on the day of your surgery. They will discuss whether a nerve block is suitable for you and explain the benefits, risks and alternatives.

Risk and nerve blocks

Nerve blocks are commonly used and are generally very safe. There are some possible side effects and risks, which are usually temporary and not serious.

The risks vary between individuals and depend on your health, the operation that you are having and the type of nerve block being used.

Possible side effects and risks include the following:

- risk of pain or discomfort while the block is being performed
- bruising, soreness or minor bleeding where the injection was given
- the nerve block not working as well as planned, which may require a 'top-up' injection or additional pain relief or sedation
- risk of prolonged block or temporary numbness, tingling or weakness in the blocked area

- an infection where the injection was given
- bleeding around the nerves
- nerve damage, which is usually temporary but can very rarely be permanent; more information on these risks can be found in our risk leaflet Nerve damage after a peripheral nerve block (**www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/nd-after-peripheral-nb**)
- a rare reaction to the local anaesthetic that can affect your heart or brain.

Some nerve blocks have additional risks because of where the injection is given. For example, certain blocks near the neck or chest can temporarily affect breathing or, very rarely, cause a collapsed lung.

Your anaesthetist will discuss the risks that are more significant for you and answer any questions that you might have.

Shared decision-making

Shared decision-making ensures that individuals are supported to make decisions that are right for them. It is a collaborative process through which a clinician supports a patient to reach a decision about their treatment.

The conversation brings together:

- the clinician's expertise, such as treatment options, evidence, risks and benefits
- what the patient knows best: their preferences, personal circumstances, goals, values and beliefs.

Find out more on the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) website: **https://bit.ly/NICE-SDMinfo**.

Below are some tools that you can use to make the most of your discussions with your anaesthetist or preoperative assessment staff:

- Choosing Wisely UK BRAN framework – use this as a reminder to ask questions about treatment (**www.aomrc.org.uk/projects-and-programmes/choosing-wisely**)
- Centre for Perioperative Care – an animation to explain shared decision-making (**www.cpoc.org.uk/patients/shared-decision-making**).

Questions you might like to ask

If you have questions about your anaesthetic, write them down (you can use the examples below and add your own). If you want to speak to an anaesthetist before the day of your operation, contact the preoperative assessment team, who may be able to arrange for you to speak to an anaesthetist on the phone or to see them in a clinic.

- **What are the advantages and disadvantages of a nerve block for me?**
- **Do I have any increased risk from a general anaesthetic?**
- **What happens if the block does not work?**

Further information about nerve blocks

RA-UK, the specialist society for regional anaesthesia, has produced an information video for patients on nerve blocks called Nerve blocks: an information video for patients which is available on their website here: **www.ra-uk.org/index.php/patient-info-video**.

Disclaimer

We try very hard to keep the information in this leaflet accurate and up to date, but we cannot guarantee this. We don't expect this general information to cover all the questions you might have or to deal with everything that might be important to you. You should discuss your choices and any worries you have with your medical team, using this leaflet as a guide. This leaflet on its own should not be treated as advice. It cannot be used for any commercial or business purpose. For full details, please see our website: **www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/resources#disclaimer**.

Information for healthcare professionals on printing this leaflet

Please consider the visual impairments of patients when printing or photocopying this leaflet. Photocopies of photocopies are discouraged because these tend to be low-quality prints and can be very difficult for patients to read. Please also make sure that you use the latest version of this leaflet, which is available on the RCoA website.

Tell us what you think

We welcome suggestions to improve this leaflet. If you're a patient or carer, we'd love to hear from you. Please complete this short survey: **www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/peripheral-nerve-blocks#tell-us** or you can scan the QR code below with your mobile.

If you have any general comments, please email them to: **patientinformation@rcoa.ac.uk**.

Your feedback helps us understand who is using our information, how useful it is and how our resources have helped you. Thank you.

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This leaflet will be reviewed within three years of the date of publication.

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