

Patient and Carer Information

ANAESTHESIA and ANALGESIA FOR HAND / WRIST / FOREARM / ELBOW SURGERY

Please read this leaflet carefully. It is important that you take note of any instructions or advice given.

If you are having an operation on your arm, anywhere from your elbow down to your hand and fingers, it is routinely performed under a local anaesthetic nerve block. This means local anaesthetic is injected around the nerves supplying the arm.

Does this mean I will be awake during my operation?

Yes. Having the operation performed under a local anaesthetic block will mean that the anaesthetist will not need to put you to sleep (a general anaesthetic). However in some instances you may benefit from sedation whereby your anaesthetist can administer medication to help you feel more relaxed and slightly sleepy.

Why am I not being put to sleep completely?

Most of these types of operations are classed as minor operations usually involving some soft tissue (skin or muscles) or small bones in the fingers, wrist or forearm. Anaesthetic techniques and technology have improved over the past decade allowing us to focus our anaesthetic on the specific part of the body where the operation is to happen. Instead of putting the whole body to sleep (a general anaesthetic) this nerve block method is a bit like putting your arm to sleep.

There are numerous advantages of having the nerve block as compared to having a general anaesthetic. A nerve block provides superior pain relief, and avoids the common side effects of general anaesthetics (nausea, vomiting, sore throat, hangover feeling, drowsiness, and loss of appetite). It also avoids some rare but serious complications of general anaesthetics such as dental damage (from having to insert a breathing tube into the mouth) and heart and lung complications (depending on your current health status).

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What does the anaesthetic nerve block involve and will it hurt?

1. When you enter the anaesthetic room, some routine monitoring such as a blood pressure reading and heart tracing will be performed.
2. Your anaesthetist will then insert a cannula (a drip) in the opposite arm to the one we will operate on. This is so that we can administer medications, which sometimes are required such as antibiotics or fluids.
3. Depending on where exactly your operation is, an injection will either be performed under your armpit or just above the collar bone. Your anaesthetist will use an ultrasound scanning machine (similar to ones used to examine pregnant women) which will mean a small amount of sterile gel will be applied to the skin.
4. You will then feel a little sting (just like a blood test) as the anaesthetist numbs the skin.
5. The anaesthetist will then insert the nerve block needle around the nerves. This can take around 5 minutes and you may feel some tingling/pins & needles in your hand or arm.
6. The needle will then be removed and the anaesthetic medicine will be allowed to soak in to work. Your arm will begin to tingle and start to feel very heavy. The anaesthetist will continuously check the numbness of your arm for the next 15 -30 minutes.
7. Once it is completely numb you can then proceed to have your operation.

What will I hear, feel or see in theatre during my operation?

There will be a team of around 6 people helping you have your operation including the surgeon, anaesthetist, anaesthetist's assistant and other theatre staff. We will lie you down and aim to keep you warm and comfortable throughout. We can offer either some background music playing or if you prefer you can bring your own music player with headphones. There are some bright lights above which will be used to shine on your arm. When the operation begins you should only feel some light pressure in your arm but nothing painful or unpleasant. In the unlikely event you do feel discomfort your anaesthetist will offer you either some strong pain relief or a general anaesthetic.

How long will the anaesthetic last?

The majority of nerve blocks will last around 8 hours but depending on the operation, your anaesthetist may administer an anaesthetic that can last up to 16 hours. You will have the opportunity to discuss this on the day.

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What are the side effects of the anaesthetic nerve block?

The vast majority of anaesthetic nerve blocks are very safe.

Some potential problems include:

- A red eye and heavy eyelid is very common and it is completely harmless. It will last as long as the anaesthetic in your arm.
- Faint feeling – lasting a few minutes and we may administer some fluids and medications.
- Failure – this is probably as low as 1%
- Bruising to the nerves – this is **uncommon**. It can occasionally cause prolonged numbness that may take anything from a few days to a few weeks to resolve. Very rarely it can take months. It is **extremely rare** (estimated 1:10,000) to cause permanent damage to the nerve.
- Bruising around the site of injection which can last a few days
- Shortness of breath – this can either be due to the needle or the medication we inject. You will be fully monitored throughout and treated appropriately in this rare event.

If you are being operated on as a day case your arm will remain heavy for a few hours and will be put in a sling until it is fully recovered. It is important that you treat the arm with care until sensation has fully returned as you will be unable to feel pain or heat e.g. don't hold a cigarette or hot drink in the affected hand!!

What is the alternative?

Whilst the preference of this unit is to perform these operations under a nerve block, on rare occasions, if you are unhappy we can perform a general anaesthetic (put you to sleep) and use morphine to control the pain afterwards. We could also provide a nerve block as well as a general anaesthetic. As mentioned previously the general anaesthetic can have a host of side effects (see section 2) as can morphine (itching, constipation, nausea, vomiting and delayed hospital discharge), which is why we prefer the nerve block technique.

What can I expect when I get home?

You should be comfortable for the rest of the day but when the block wears off it can become sore. We therefore advise for you to take the pain killing medication prescribed for you regularly.

The numbness in your arm should not last more than 24 hours. In the unlikely event it does then we would like you to give us a call.

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Who can I call if there is a problem?

Most routine problems regarding your wound can be dealt with by your general practitioner however the anaesthetic department would like you to call if there is persistent numbness or lack of sensation in your arm 48 hours after your operation.

- If you still have a numb arm 48 hours after your operation then please call the **Outpatient Anaesthetic Hotline on 01423 557733.**
- For all other queries or concerns after your operation please use the contact phone numbers given in your discharge pack.
- We may wish to contact you by telephone after your operation to check how happy you are with your anaesthetic. If you don't want to be disturbed then please contact us on 01423 554506 between 8 am - 4 pm.

How do I look after my numb arm at home?

Do take your prescribed pain killers in advance as it can be sore when the block wears off

Do keep your arm in a sling for support and protection

Do keep your arm out of harm's way (eg. kitchen hob/oven)

Don't attempt to drive or operate machinery

Don't rest your arm on a radiator or heater as there is a risk of burn and you will not feel it burning.

If you require this information in an alternative language or format (such as Braille, audiotape or large print), please ask the staff who are looking after you.