



This information sheet answers frequently asked questions about having regional anaesthesia (anaesthetic nerve block). It has been developed to be used in discussion with your doctor or healthcare professional.

## 1. What is a nerve block?

Regional anaesthesia (nerve block) is where a nerve or group of nerves in a specific area of the body can be made numb by a local anaesthetic injection. Using local anaesthetic can sometimes allow you to stay awake for the procedure.

Local anaesthesia provides long-lasting pain relief, during and after surgery. It can last from 2 to 18 hours, depending on the injection site and which medicines are used.

Sometimes a very thin tube is put through the needle and left in place. This means that the local anaesthetic can be given for a longer period of time—at times up to a few days. This tube can also be connected to a pump called a Patient Controlled Analgesia (PCA) machine and you can be in charge of your own pain relief.

Your anaesthetist will explain the particular nerve block that is selected for your surgery. In some operations, the nerve block will be combined with sedation and/or a general anaesthetic. Your doctor will discuss with you the type or types of anaesthetic which are suitable for you and your operation.

## 2. What are the benefits of a nerve block?

The benefits include:

- reducing the need for other anaesthetic medicines or avoiding a general anaesthetic altogether
- pain relief after your surgery which will assist you with moving about earlier
- you may not need as much strong pain relieving medicine, such as morphine: this will help reduce the side effects associated with these medicines, which include nausea (feeling sick), drowsiness and constipation.

The above benefits may lead to a reduced stay in hospital for you.

## 3. What are the risks of a nerve block?

Every anaesthetic has a risk of side effects and complications. Whilst these are usually temporary, some of them may cause long-term problems.

**Common side effects and complications include:**

- pain at the injection site
- bruising (haematoma) at the injection site: if you take blood thinning medicines you are more likely to get a haematoma as it may affect your blood clotting.

**Uncommon side effects and complications include:**

- failure of block: this may require a further injection of anaesthetic or a different method of anaesthesia to be used
- temporary nerve damage recovering in a few days to months, damage may cause weakness and/or numbness of the body part that the nerve goes to
- overdose of local anaesthetic
- allergic reaction
- lung collapse (only with some blocks)
- damage to surrounding structures such as blood vessels, nerves and muscles.

**Rare risks and complications include:**

- permanent nerve damage
- serious allergic reaction
- infection at the site of injection: may require antibiotics and further treatment
- cardiac arrest (very rare)
- seizures (very rare)
- death (very rare).

## 4. What are my specific risks?

There may also be risks specific to your individual condition and circumstances. Your doctor/healthcare professional will discuss these with you. Ensure these are written on the consent form before you sign it.



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## 5. What are the risks of not having a nerve block?

There may be consequences if you choose not to have the proposed anaesthetic. Please discuss these with your doctor/healthcare professional.

## 6. Who will give me the local anaesthetic?

Your anaesthetic will be given by a specialist anaesthetist, your treating doctor or their team, a GP with training in anaesthetics (particularly in rural areas), or a doctor/healthcare professional/student undergoing further training. All trainees are supervised according to relevant professional guidelines.

## 7. What happens when the block is being performed?

- Your anaesthetist will ask you to keep still while the injections are given. You may notice a warm tingling feeling as the anaesthetic begins to take effect.
- Your operation will only go ahead when you and your anaesthetist are sure that the area is numb.
- You will remain alert and aware of your surroundings, unless you are having sedation. A screen shields the operating site, so you will not see the operation unless you want to.
- If you are having sedation, you will be sleepy and relaxed. However, you may be aware of events around you.
- Your anaesthetist is always near you and you can speak to him or her whenever you want to.

## 8. What are my responsibilities before having an anaesthetic nerve block?

You are at less risk of problems from an anaesthetic if you do the following:

### In preparation for your procedure:

- Increase your fitness before your procedure to improve your blood circulation and lung health. Ask your GP about exercising safely.
- If you are overweight, losing some weight will reduce many of the risks of having an anaesthetic. Ask your GP about losing weight safely.
- Stop smoking as early as possible before your surgery to give your lungs and heart a chance to improve. Smoking cuts down the oxygen in your blood and increases breathing problems during and after an operation. Phone 13 QUIT (13 78 48).

## 8. What are my responsibilities before having an anaesthetic nerve block?

### (continued)

- Drink less alcohol, as alcohol may alter the effect of the anaesthetic medicines.
- Do not drink any alcohol 24 hours before surgery.
- Stop taking recreational drugs (this includes recreational smoking such as marijuana) before your surgery as these may affect the anaesthetic.
- If you take anticoagulant or antiplatelet (blood thinning) medicines, such as warfarin, aspirin, clopidogrel (Plavix, Iscover, Coplavix), prasugrel (Effient), dipyridamole (Persantin or Asasantin), ticagrelor (Brilinta), ticlopidine (Tilodene), apixaban (Eliquis), dabigatran (Pradaxa), rivaroxaban (Xarelto) or complementary/herbal/alternative medicines such as fish oil or turmeric:
  - ask your surgeon and/or anaesthetist if you should stop taking it before surgery as it may affect your blood clotting
  - do NOT stop blood thinning medicines without medical advice
  - if you are asked to stop taking blood thinning medicine before your procedure, ask your doctor when you can restart the blood thinning medicine.

### On the day of your procedure:

- **Nothing to eat or drink** ('nil by mouth'): you will be told when to have your last meal and drink. Do NOT eat (including lollies), drink, or chew gum after this time otherwise your operation may be delayed or cancelled. This is to make sure your stomach is empty so that if you vomit, there will be nothing to go into your lungs.
- **If you are a smoker or drink alcohol:** do not smoke or drink alcohol.
- **If you are taking medicines:** most medicines should be continued before an operation, but there are some important exceptions:
  - your doctor will provide specific instructions about your medicines
  - take to the hospital all your prescribed medicines, those medicines you buy over the counter, herbal remedies and supplements to show your anaesthetist what you are taking.
- **If you feel unwell:** telephone the ward/hospital for advice.



## 8. What are my responsibilities before having an anaesthetic nerve block? *(continued)*

- Tell your doctor and the anaesthetist if you have:
  - health problems (e.g. diabetes, high blood pressure, infectious diseases, serious illnesses), including if regular treatment or a stay in hospital is needed
  - a drug addiction
  - had previous problems and/or known family problems with anaesthesia
  - false teeth, caps, loose teeth or other dental problems
  - been taking prescribed and/or over the counter medicines, herbal remedies and supplements; this may include and are not limited to blood thinning medicines, the contraceptive pill, antidepressants and/or diabetic medicines (e.g. insulin)
  - allergies/intolerances of any type and side effects.

## 9. Following the nerve block

The area that has been blocked may remain numb or weak for up to 24 hours (longer if you have special tubing inserted).

For your own safety:

- take care not to injure or bump the area that has been numbed with the local anaesthetic as you will not be able to feel pain
- do not place hot or very cold things on the affected part as this could cause burns
- if you have a ‘weak’ leg, do not walk without a person to assist you
- ask your doctor/health professional whether you can:
  - drive any type of car, bike or other vehicle
  - operate machinery including cooking implements
- if the numbness/weakness has not gone away after 24 hours, contact your doctor.

## 10. Useful sources of information

Information on *Hospital care: before, during and after* and *Surgical procedures* is available on the Queensland Health website: [www.qld.gov.au/health/services/hospital-care/index.html](http://www.qld.gov.au/health/services/hospital-care/index.html)

## 10. Useful sources of information *(continued)*

Further information may be found on the following websites:

- Queensland Health: [www.health.qld.gov.au/consent](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/consent)
- Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists: [www.anzca.edu.au/patients](http://www.anzca.edu.au/patients)
- Royal College of Anaesthetists: [www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo](http://www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo)

(This publication includes text taken from the Royal College of Anaesthetists’ (RCoA) leaflets ‘*Nerve blocks for surgery on the shoulder, arm or hand, 2015*’ and ‘*Section 13: Nerve damage associated with peripheral nerve block, 2013*’ but the RCoA has not reviewed this as a whole).

## 11. Questions to ask my doctor/healthcare professional

Ask your doctor/healthcare professional if you do not understand any aspect of the information in this patient information sheet or any other information you have been given about your condition, treatment options and proposed procedure.

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## 12. Contact us

Your local contact details are:

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