

What is a Nerve Block?



A nerve block is when a nerve, or group of nerves, in a specific area of the body are made numb by a local anaesthetic injection. Nerve blocks are sometimes called regional anaesthesia because they anaesthetise a region of the body.

Nerve blocks are commonly used to provide better pain relief during and after surgery. They can last from 3 to 24 hours or longer, depending on the injection site and which medicines are used. Sometimes surgery can be performed with a nerve block as the only anaesthetic. However, the nerve block is more commonly combined with sedation or a general anaesthetic for surgery.

What are the benefits of a nerve block?

The main benefit of a nerve block is less pain after your surgery.

Other benefits include:

- You will not need as much pain relief medicine, such as morphine
- You are less likely to have vomiting, drowsiness and constipation
- You will usually be able to move about earlier
- Sometimes a nerve block can be used instead of a general anaesthetic
- You can wake up feeling much better
- You may be able to go home earlier.

What are the side-effects and risks of a nerve block?

Common side-effects and complications from nerve blocks include:

- A small bruise at the injection site. If you take blood thinning medications you are more likely to get this.
- Muscle weakness. The nerves that allow you to feel pain also control your muscles. While the nerve block is working you will have numbness and weakness in the area of your body affected by the nerve block. When the nerve block wears off you will get normal feeling and muscle strength back.

Uncommon side-effects and complications include:

- Failure of block: this may require a further injection of anaesthetic or a different pain relief medication to be used



- The nerve may take longer to recover causing some numbness or weakness for a few weeks to months.

Very rare risks and complications include:

- Damage to surrounding structures such as blood vessels, nerves, muscles or lung, permanent nerve damage, infection at the site of injection, overdose of local anaesthetic, allergic reaction, seizures, cardiac arrest or death.

What are the risks of NOT having a nerve block?

- You may need more anaesthetic and pain medication
- You may experience more pain and vomiting and less mobility
- You may need a longer stay in hospital.

Every anaesthetic has a risk of side effects and complications. Your anaesthetist will discuss your specific options and risks with you.

What happens when the block is being performed?

- You may be given some sedation
- Your anaesthetist will likely use an ultrasound machine to see the nerves under your skin
- A nerve block involves an injection. You will feel a little sting like any other needle injection
- You may notice a warm tingling feeling as the anaesthetic begins to take effect
- 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/her whenever you want to.

What are my responsibilities after having a nerve block?

- The area that has been blocked may remain numb or weak for up to 24 hours or longer
- 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 any damage that may be caused
- 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
- If you have a 'weak' arm it should be supported in a sling
- After this if you have any concerns you can see your GP or present to the Emergency Department.

References

Schug S, Palmer G, Scott D, Halliwell R, Trinca J.
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