



**Northumbria Healthcare**  
NHS Foundation Trust

# Nerve blocks for surgery on your upper and lower limbs

Issued by the department of anaesthesia

Anybody who is having an operation on their shoulder, arm, hand, leg or foot may be offered a nerve block. A nerve block targets the nerves which supply the part of your body which is being operated on. This area will temporarily feel numb, pain free and heavy. It often means a general anaesthetic can be avoided. This is called regional anaesthesia.

## What is a nerve block?

A nerve block is achieved by injecting local anaesthetic beside a nerve. This makes the area go numb and your affected limb will become heavy. This means you can have your operation without feeling pain or any uncomfortable sensation in the area which is being operated on.

In your upper limb the nerves travel from your neck underneath your collarbone. This means that we can numb your arm from your shoulder to your fingertips. Depending on the operation the nerve block will either be done in your neck, next to your collarbone, under your armpit or further down your arm.

In your lower limb nerves can also be blocked, this may be done as high as your groin or as low down as your ankle depending on your operation.

Patients, understandably, often feel anxious about this and these procedures may be accompanied by medication to make you feel more relaxed. This is called sedation.

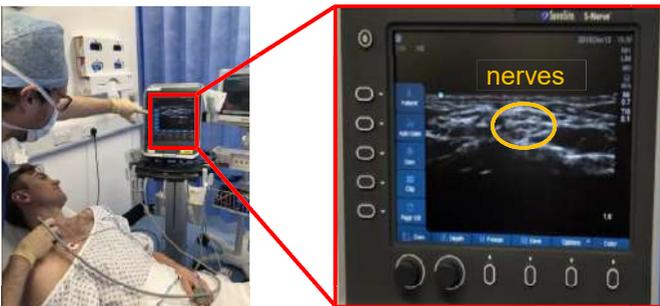
You are still required to not eat 6 hours before your operation but we encourage you to continue drinking water right up until the time you are called for surgery.

## What is the process?

You will be seen on the ward by your anaesthetist before your operation. They will go through the options for your anaesthetic which may include the option of having a nerve block. Risks, benefits and alternatives of the anaesthetic options available will be discussed.

If you are happy to proceed with this, a nerve block will be performed in the theatre department. It is done in an area near theatre recovery called the block room. Before the procedure begins you will be attached to some equipment to monitor your heart rate and blood pressure.

Your skin will be cleaned with antiseptic solution and the nerves that we need to 'block' will be found using an ultrasound machine. Your skin will be numbed and local anaesthetic will be injected beside the nerve. After the injection is finished it can take up to 45 minutes to reach the full effect, however this often happens earlier depending on the type of local anaesthetic used by your anaesthetist. You may notice a temperature change in the limb you have had the nerve block in and it will also feel heavy and numb. Once your anaesthetist is satisfied with the effect of the block you will be taken through to the operating theatre.



**Example image from the block room, anaesthetist using the ultrasound scanner to identify nerves supplying the arm.**

Certain operations can be performed under a nerve block only. In this case, you may be offered music for relaxation. However, some patients would like to have some sedation that will often put you into a light sleep. You might also be given the option of having a general anaesthetic.

## What are the benefits of a nerve block?

- **Better pain relief after your operation.** You may get benefit for up to 24 hours after the injection with little or no pain at all. This means that you will require fewer painkillers, which can reduce their potential side effects such as nausea, vomiting and constipation.
- **Avoidance of general anaesthetic** and its potential side effects such as nausea, vomiting and prolonged drowsiness.
- Often due to the reasons listed above patients are able to **leave hospital sooner.**

## What are the risks of a nerve block?

Generally, nerve blocks are very safe and they are performed with great care. The risks depend on the part of your body having the injection. The main risks are:

- **Failure of nerve block** - occasionally patients will not get total pain relief from their nerve block however generally they will still be more comfortable than if this had not been done. If this happens you will be able to get additional pain relief if required. We will check that the nerve block is working before you have your surgery and if it is not satisfactory you will either be given an extra 'top-up' dose or a general anaesthetic. If you are having your surgery awake and you experience any discomfort, you need to inform your anaesthetist immediately and the operation will stop. Your anaesthetist will then give you a strong pain killer first and if this is not effective you will be offered a general anaesthetic.

- **Nerve injury** -Temporary altered sensation can occur for up to 48 hours following a nerve block. Permanent nerve damage is rare and happens in between 1 in 2,000 to 1 in 5,000 nerve blocks.
- **Breathing difficulty** - this is only the case if you have a block near your collarbone or your neck. In a majority of cases this is a temporary and mild sensation of not being able to get a full breath in and it is very likely that this will improve as your nerve block wears off. Very infrequently this can be because of accidental puncture of the lining of your lung however this happens very rarely (in less than 1 in 1000 cases).
- **Droopy eye-lid** - this is only an issue if you have an injection in your neck or near your collarbone. This is a known side effect and has no harmful effects. It will wear off as your nerve block wears off.
- **Serious reaction to local anaesthetic** - this is an extremely rare complication and your anaesthetic team will manage this promptly.
- **Bruising or bleeding at the anaesthetic site.**
- **Infection** - this is a very rare complication.

## After your operation

It is really important that you protect the limb that has received a nerve block. It will not feel as though it belongs to you and therefore it needs to be protected from accidental injury (such as knocks and bumps). Operations on your arm usually mean that you will be given a sling to protect it. It is important not to rest your blocked arm or leg near a radiator or any other hot surfaces as you will not feel sensation if your skin burns. Equally extra care is needed when having hot drinks to avoid accidental splashes.

It is also important to prepare for the nerve block wearing off. Usually this will begin to happen within 24 hours of your operation. It is therefore important to take regular pain killers (such as paracetamol) so that you are prepared for when the operated limb is waking up. In addition, you will be prescribed stronger painkillers, depending on what surgery you had.

**The staff on your ward will give you detailed instructions when to use those. Please don't hesitate to ask if you feel that you need any further information.**

## Contact details

If you have any questions or concerns following your block please contact us on:

**0344 811 8111** – ask to speak to the **on-call anaesthetist**

Additional useful information can be found at  
**[www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo](http://www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo)**



## 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](http://www.nhs.uk/pages/homepage.aspx)

### NICE (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence)

[www.nice.org.uk](http://www.nice.org.uk)

### Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

Freephone: **0800 032 0202**

Text: **07815 500015**

Email: [northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk](mailto:northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk)

### Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust

General Enquiries **03 44 811 8111**

[www.northumbria.nhs.uk](http://www.northumbria.nhs.uk)

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