

A patient's guide to nerve blocks for hand surgery

What is local anaesthesia?

During hand surgery, we can prevent you feeling pain from specific areas by injecting anaesthetic at certain points. This is called a nerve block (a form of local anaesthesia).

Why use local anaesthesia?

- It improves pain relief after surgery
- It reduces the use of strong drugs that can cause sickness and drowsiness after surgery

Is a block painful?

Only slightly. A needle is inserted into your skin next to a nerve and local anaesthetic is given to numb the area. The anaesthetic doctor will use a special needle that uses small amounts of electricity to stimulate the nerves; this will make the muscles twitch. This procedure should cause no damage but may feel unusual. The doctor may use an ultrasound machine (like those used in pregnancy scans) to help find the nerve.

Where will they inject?

The site of the injection varies: blocks can be done at the wrist, near the shoulder and under

the armpit. These can numb different areas depending on where the surgery takes place.

Do I need to be awake during the nerve block?

You will usually be awake whilst the nerve block is done but after that you may wish to be asleep. You can discuss this with your anaesthetic doctor, who will be present to make sure you are comfortable throughout.

How long does the anaesthetic last?

It can take up to 15 minutes to place a block. It will then take about 30 minutes for the block to create a numbing effect. The numbness might remain for 24 hours or longer allowing surgery without pain, and pain relief after the operation. The muscles will remain weak after the block and the arm will feel heavy. Sometimes this feels as if your arm doesn't belong to you. How quickly this wears off varies and can occasionally take up to three days. Painkilling tablets will be provided as you need them. You will also be given painkillers to take home.

Can there be any problems with a nerve block?

There are some risks with using nerve blocks. Sometimes the pain relief is insufficient - this can easily be treated with more anaesthesia or painkillers. There may be some bruising around the area of injection or some unusual tingling for some days. Very rarely there can be complications such as serious bleeding, infection and injury to the nerve. Risks are reduced by using a special ultrasound and nerve-stimulating machine to find the nerve. These problems are all uncommon.

Please talk to your anaesthetic doctor if you have any questions or want to discuss alternatives.

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