

Having hand surgery under a nerve block

What is a nerve block

A nerve block is an injection of local anaesthetic near a nerve to block pain and numb it during and after surgery. This may then enable an operation on a hand or arm to be carried out without the need for a general anaesthetic. It is an extremely safe procedure.

How is it done?

An anaesthetic doctor will perform the nerve block injection. To start with, you will have a drip, or a small needle, inserted into one of your veins. Your pulse and blood pressure will be monitored. You may be given some sedative medication to help you relax whilst the nerve block is being performed.

The site of the nerve block injection varies (usually above the collar bone or the arm-pit or halfway down the arm). Your anaesthetist will discuss this with you. Most commonly this is done using an ultrasound machine to locate the nerves but other techniques can also be used to identify your nerves.

How long does it take and is it painful?

The whole procedure should take between 10 and 20 minutes and you should experience only mild discomfort. It is done with some sedation and is not generally painful. The local anaesthetic will take 10-30 minutes to work. Your anaesthetist will check to make sure the block is working before the surgeons begin the operation.

What are the benefits of having a nerve block as the only anaesthetic for the operation?

A good nerve block provides the best pain relief with fast recovery time and shorter hospital stay. Pain relief can last from 6 to 18 hours. There is very minimal need for strong painkillers. This means less nausea and vomiting, and earlier mobility and discharge home.

What are the risks associated with a nerve block?

Nerve blocks, like general anaesthetics, are very safe. Occasionally during a nerve block procedure, nerves can be damaged resulting in numbness or weakness in the arm. Most commonly the damage is only temporary. Rarely, the damage can be permanent. (1 in 2000-5000 cases)

Other uncommon complications are:

- A bruise, or haematoma, at the injection site
- An infection at the site of injection
- A reaction to the local anaesthetic which can involve seizures or heart rhythm problems

What to expect after a nerve block?

1. Do not worry if you lose complete sensation in the whole of the arm for 18-24 hours after the operation. It returns once the local anaesthetic wears off.
2. Keep the arm in a sling close to your body
3. Do not lie on the operation side as there is a risk of compressing the blood supply.
4. Keep away from hot, sharp or moving objects. Due to the loss of sensation in your arm you may be at risk of burns or further injuries until normal sensation returns.
5. Do not drive until full arm function is regained. The amount of time this takes varies according to the type of surgery, but it is at least a week after the operation.