PATIENT INFORMATION

Nerve Catheter

What to expect if you're offered a nerve block catheter for pain relief after shoulder surgery

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ABOUT YOUR PROCEDURE

Your nerve block catheter

You are booked for a shoulder operation. As part of your post-surgery pain management, your Anaesthetist may offer you a **brachial plexus nerve block catheter** (a small plastic tube placed in your neck that delivers local anaesthetic to keep your shoulder and arm numb for **3 to 5 days**).

The procedure takes **5 to 10 minutes** and is well tolerated. Some anaesthetists perform it while you are awake or lightly sedated; others wait until you are under general anaesthesia. A small device that contains local anaesthetic is connected to the tube. You administer the local anaesthetic yourself when you need it by pressing a button. Once the device is empty, you remove the catheter at home. You can do this yourself or have somebody help you.

3 to 5
days of ongoing pain relief

5 to 10
minutes to place the catheter

RISKS AND SIDE EFFECTS

What can go wrong

1. **Block failure (~10%).** The catheter can migrate away from the target nerves, causing the medication to wear off. Additional oral pain relief medications may be required. If this occurs while you are still in hospital, the anaesthetist or pain nursing team will discuss the option of replacing the catheter.
2. **Facial numbness.** Relatively common, particularly around the jaw. Drooping of the eyelid (Horner's Syndrome) may also occur. Both are temporary and will resolve once the catheter is removed.
3. **Breathlessness.** May occur if the medication temporarily numbs a nearby breathing nerve. Most patients do not notice this. However, if you feel unwell, please present to the emergency department.
4. **Voice change.** Uncommon. Caused by medication spreading to the nerves supplying the voice box. This will resolve without treatment. Please inform your anaesthetist or pain nursing team when they contact you after surgery.
5. **Nerve injury (rare, approximately 1 in 5,000).** The risk of significant nerve injury is very low; the majority of anaesthetists will not encounter a major complication during their career. Nerve injuries range from mild skin numbness to temporary weakness of the arm. Almost all resolve within six weeks. If you experience weakness or numbness after catheter removal, please inform your anaesthetist or pain nurse.

WHAT TO EXPECT

While the catheter is in

- Numbness (pins and needles) in your arm and/or hand while the block is working.
- Your arm will likely be weak or unable to move and will be supported in a sling.
- Regular oral pain relief medications will still be required alongside the catheter.
- Some patients find the numb sensation uncomfortable; most, however, prefer it to pain.

YOUR OPTIONS

Alternative pain relief options

Single shot nerve block
Similar to the catheter but no tube is left in place. Numbness lasts 12 to 24 hours and provides excellent analgesia while active. When the numbness wears off, pain may be considerable and require higher doses of morphine-like pain relief medications.

Oral pain relief medications only (no nerve block)
Avoids all procedure-related risks. However, post-operative shoulder pain is significant and can be difficult to manage with medications alone. Morphine-like pain relief medications carry common side effects including sedation, constipation, and nausea, and generally provide inferior pain relief compared with a nerve block.

Your anaesthetist will discuss all available options with you on the day of surgery. Please do not hesitate to raise any questions at that time.

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