

Patient information

Interscalene blocks for open shoulder surgery and suprascapular and/or axillary nerve block for key hole surgery

What is it?

Open shoulder surgery is often followed by quite marked post-operative pain and traditional methods of pain relief are often inadequate. A frequently used solution to the problem is to numb the nerves to the shoulder with a single injection of local anaesthetic called a nerve block.

How is it done?

When you arrive in theatre a drip is put in your hand and monitoring equipment will be attached to you. A small amount of sedation is given to make you drowsy. The anaesthetist will feel your neck to find the position for the injection.

Alternatively the anaesthetist uses an ultrasound probe to locate the nerves; this is **not** painful. Then local anaesthetic is injected into the skin to numb it. The 'block needle' is connected to a special box that can make the muscles in your arm twitch. The needle is then inserted through the skin in the numbed area until a twitch is seen. This twitching is **not** painful but might feel strange as it is outside your own control.

Finally the local anaesthetic is injected and the twitching will stop. Your arm will start to feel numb quite quickly after the injection. The extent of numbness will be checked before the operation starts.

Advantages

- You will have good pain relief for 12 –14 hours after the surgery and you should be able to manage on a relatively smaller amount of painkillers when the numbness has disappeared.

- You can choose to stay awake, have light sedation or a light general anaesthetic to supplement the nerve block.
- The risk of queasiness and sickness is less with this kind of anaesthetic.
- You will be less drowsy and should be able to go home sooner than after a general anaesthetic.

Side effects

- Occasionally the block does not work properly and you will then need a general anaesthetic, but you should still get some pain relief from the nerve block.
- You may get a drooping eyelid on the same side as the block is sited.
- You may also experience a flushed face, a hoarse voice and occasionally a feeling of not being able to breathe in as deeply as normally.
- The side effects mentioned above tend to last a couple of hours and are **not** dangerous.
- When you are first offered something to drink after the operation, it may be difficult to swallow, so leave drinking for a couple of hours until the problem disappears.

Complications

- Major complications (nerve damage) from blocks are rare but can occur (approximately 1 in 5000 blocked patients).
- Nerve damage can happen both from the operation and the anaesthetic. Nerve damage may also be seen after a general anaesthetic, often due to positioning on the theatre table.
- We will take every precaution to prevent damage but should you experience problems please get back in touch with the hospital ward you were admitted to and they will let the anaesthetic department know.

Keyhole surgery on the shoulder

Keyhole surgery can still be quite painful post-operatively, even if you do not have as big a skin incision as with open surgery.

Because it is a smaller procedure, a less extensive nerve block may be more appropriate than the interscalene block mentioned above.

We suggest that you have two smaller blocks: a suprascapular block on top of the shoulder and/or an axillary nerve block on the back of your upper arm, for post-operative pain control.

The two blocks can be done with you asleep or awake. They can be done with ultrasound guidance and/or nerve stimulation as mentioned for the interscalene block. You will, however, need a light general anaesthetic as well for the surgery.

The blocks only numb the majority of your shoulder joint and not your arm, so are less extensive than an interscalene block. There is still a risk of nerve damage but the effect of the nerve damage is far less extensive with the two smaller nerve blocks. You will need other painkillers: first to supplement the block and after the block has disappeared for further pain relief.

Discharge advice

Your arm/shoulder can be numb for up to 48 hours. The arm needs to be kept in a sling until sensation and movement are back to normal.

You will not be aware of anything touching it, so stay out of the kitchen and do not let children or pets jump on you. Avoid spilling hot drinks and food on your numb arm, since you will not be able to feel it if you get burnt.

Make sure you take painkillers regularly, as instructed, spreading the dose out over the whole day.

If you would like any information regarding access to the West Suffolk Hospital and its facilities please visit the website for AccessAble (formerly DisabledGo)

<https://www.accessable.co.uk>

