What is a nerve block?

A nerve block is an injection of local anaesthetic close to nerves so that the area of the body supplied by those nerves is numbed.

A nerve block can be used as the main anaesthetic for an operation (along with sedative medication to help you relax if you choose). Alternatively, a nerve block can be used in combination with a general anaesthetic to control pain after the surgery.

What surgery can I have a nerve block for?

Your anaesthetist will discuss whether a nerve block is suitable for your surgery. Many different surgeries can be performed using nerve blocks aimed at different parts of the body but not all operations can be done under a nerve block.

What are the benefits of having a nerve block?

Having a general anaesthetic is very safe but there are certain risks and side effects which may be avoided by having a nerve block. Other medical conditions can make general anaesthesia more complicated and a nerve block may be an easier or safer alternative. Your anaesthetist will discuss the options with you.

Controlling pain is very important to help you make a quick, uneventful recovery. Nerve blocks can completely eliminate pain from the operation site and also help to avoid the side effects of pain medications, such as nausea and vomiting, itchiness, drowsiness and breathing problems. If you are taking strong pain medications prior to surgery, your pain may be more difficult to control.

You are less likely to feel sick and you will be able to eat and drink sooner if your procedure is done with a nerve block instead of general anaesthesia. This is important in some patients such as those who have diabetes. You will also feel less sleepy afterwards.
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What are the risks associated with a nerve block?
Nerve blocks are very safe but they do not always work perfectly. If the nerve block is used as the main anaesthetic and it is not blocking the nerves completely, then your anaesthetist or surgeon may need to inject more local anaesthetic or a general anaesthetic could be needed. If you have pain in the recovery area after a nerve block, other pain relief medication can be given.

Occasionally nerves can be damaged by the needle resulting in numbness, pins and needles or weakness in the arm or leg. Most commonly the damage is only temporary but rarely can be permanent (less than one in 2,500).

Other uncommon complications are bruising or bleeding, infection or reaction to the local anaesthetic which can involve seizures or heart rhythm problems.

How will the nerve block be performed?
A specially trained doctor (an Anaesthetist) will perform the nerve block. To start with, you will have a cannula (IV drip) inserted, your pulse and blood pressure will be monitored and you may be given some sedative medication to make you more comfortable. Your anaesthetist will then identify the correct area to inject local anaesthetic around the nerves. Most commonly this is done using an ultrasound machine. The whole procedure should take between 10 and 20 minutes and you should experience only mild discomfort. The local anaesthetic will take 20-30 minutes to work. Your anaesthetist will check to make sure the block is working before the surgeon begins.

How long will the nerve block last?
Depending on the type of nerve block, numbness lasting from 2 to 48 hours is normal. Occasionally a fine plastic tube is left beside the nerves for infusion of local anaesthetic solution. This can provide pain relief for a number of days following the operation.

Can I change my mind?
You are free to change your mind about whether to have a nerve block at any stage before your operation. If you choose not to have a nerve block and you experience severe pain after your operation that is difficult to control with pain medications, a “rescue “nerve block can often be performed.