

Congress Surgery Center
Patient Education: Peripheral Nerve Blocks

1. What is a peripheral nerve block?

A peripheral nerve block causes the loss of sensation of a particular part of the body; for example, an arm or leg. This is to improve pain control post-operatively. The anesthesiologist places numbing medication (local anesthesia) near a nerve (or cluster of nerves) to numb the area of your body that requires surgery.

2. How is the peripheral nerve block performed?

The nerve will be identified using ultrasound or with other techniques. Your skin will be cleaned with an antiseptic solution. A small, special needle is then placed near the nerve(s) that need to be numbed. Local anesthetic is injected and bathes the nerve(s).

3. What are the benefits of a peripheral nerve block?

The use of nerve blocks is associated with reduced use of narcotics for post-operative pain due to improved post-operative pain control. Frequently, there is less nausea and vomiting. Patients typically have a faster post-operative recovery and discharge time.

4. What are the risks of a peripheral nerve block?

Risks include: bleeding, infection, bruising, local anesthetic toxicity, and nerve injury.

5. How common is nerve injury?

Nerve injury after a regional block is a rare occurrence, which can occur anywhere in 0.5-1% of the population. Of those affected, greater than 95% resolve over 4 weeks, and over 99% resolve within 1 year.

6. How long will the block last?

Depending on the medication used, blocks generally last anywhere from 10-30 hours. As the block wears off, a feeling of 'pins and needles' may be experienced. It is very important to start taking your oral pain medicine as soon as possible. After arriving home, eat a little bit of food. If there is no nausea, then start taking the oral pain medicine and continue to take it as prescribed.

7. Are there any special precautions I need to take?
Altered sensation and movement of the affected limb can be unsafe. Do not attempt to perform any tasks with the blocked limb until you have complete return of sensation and strength. For blocks of the lower extremity, it is important to have someone be able to assist you for the first night due to difficulty with ambulation.

8. What other side effects can occur with a nerve block for shoulder surgery?
For shoulder surgery, patients may experience: hoarse voice, shortness of breath, loss of sweating, bloodshot conjunctiva, drooping of the eyelid and a small pupil on the side of the operative shoulder. These will resolve when the nerve block has worn off.

9. What is a nerve block catheter?
A nerve block catheter is a skinny tube placed near your nerves in order to continuously bathe your nerves with numbing medicine. The catheter is attached to a machine (“pain pump”) the size of a small ball. This pain pump is filled with local anesthetic, which continuously delivers numbing medicine through the catheter in order to provide you with pain relief for 2-3 days. Once the medicine runs out, the catheter is removed. Removal is a simple procedure that you or a caretaker can do at home. The Pain service will follow up with you daily by phone and be available for any questions you may have regarding the catheter.
 - Catheters are more suitable for certain surgeries and sites than others. Your anesthesiologist will help determine whether this is a good option for you.