Intermountain Health

Nerve Block for Pain Control After Surgery: Home Instructions

What is a nerve block and why do I need it?

Nerve blocks can help manage your pain and reduce the need for pain medications like opioids. Opioids can have unwanted side effects, including potential addiction.

Nerve blocks decrease pain signals in a specific area of your body, such as your arm, leg, abdomen (belly), or chest. It is used to minimize pain both during surgery and as you recover after. A nerve block is given as a one-time injection or through a nerve block catheter. A nerve block catheter is a tiny, flexible tube placed under the skin.

When will the nerve block wear off?

How soon your nerve block wears off will depend on the type of block and the medication used. If you had a single injection, it should wear off anywhere from 8 to 72 hours after it was given. Be sure to ask your anesthesia provider about the type of nerve block and medications used for your procedure and what you can expect.

What can I expect?

You may feel a tingling and heaviness in the area, as if it is "asleep." Feelings of numbness and loss of sensation are normal. Your sensation will slowly start to return as the nerve block wears off. You may notice sensations like:

- Cold
- Itching
- Tingling
- An increased awareness of pain

As your sensation returns, pay close attention to your pain level and take your medication before your block wears off.

How do I prevent injury at home?

Take extra care not to injure yourself. You may not be able to feel pain, pressure, or extreme temperatures until the block wears off.

- Your arm or leg may feel weak from the block. This can increase your chance of injury.
- The nerve block can limit your body's ability to sense it's own position in space (proprioception). This increases your risk of misjudgment and injury to your affected limb.
- Don't let anything bump or rest on the numb area.
- Avoid extreme temperatures. You may not feel discomfort or pain from something too hot or too cold.
- Follow your surgeon's instructions carefully when using cold packs or ice.

How do I prevent injury at home? (continued)

- Change positions often. This will help you avoid putting too much pressure on the affected area. You may need help changing positions.
- If you are given a brace, sling, or crutches, use them exactly as directed.

What are the side effects?

Possible side effects include:

- Irritating numbness
- Weakness and difficulty moving an arm or leg
- Pain from surgery even with the nerve block
- Bruising at the nerve block site

Upper arm or shoulder surgery

If you had surgery on your upper arm or shoulder, you may have:

- Sagging upper eyelid
- Smaller pupil, or slight eye redness
- Shortness of breath especially when lying flat. This will go away once the block wears off. Sleeping in a sitting position can make it easier to breathe.

These symptoms are common and will get better as the block wears off.

When should I call my doctor?

Call your doctor right away if you experience any of the following:

- Severe shortness of breath
- Allergic reaction
- Numbness or weakness in the arm or leg for more than a week
- Pain that does not get better with the medication you were prescribed
- Signs of infection such as redness, swelling, or a fever of 101° F (38.8° C) or higher

Contact your pain team with any non-emergency questions about your block.

Phone: _____

Call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room if you have:

- **Numbness around your mouth**
- **Blurred vision**
- **Ringing in your ears**
- **A metallic taste**
- **A seizure**

Notes

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