Peripheral Nerve Block for Pain Control after Surgery: In the Hospital

What is it and why do I need it?
A peripheral nerve block is a way to “turn off” pain signals in a specific area of your body, such as your knee, leg, shoulder, or arm. It’s used to prevent pain during surgery and as you heal afterward. After surgery, the nerve block can reduce your need for other pain medications that have more side effects. You may be given one or more of the peripheral nerve blocks listed below.

Blocks in the leg or knee:
- Femoral nerve block, for surgery on the knee and the front of the thigh
- Sciatic nerve block, for surgery on the knee, ankle, or foot
- Popliteal Fossa nerve block, for surgery on the lower leg or foot

Blocks given in the upper arm or shoulder:
- Interscalene block, for surgery on the shoulder, arm, or elbow
- Brachial Plexus nerve block, for surgery on the arm, elbow, or hand

Talking with your doctor
Before your surgery, your doctor will meet with you to describe the peripheral nerve block. You will discuss the benefits, risks, and alternatives. Don’t be afraid to ask questions. Your discussion with your doctor is the most important part of learning about what to expect.

Potential benefits
- Pain relief during and after surgery
- Shorter recovery period
- Reduced need for oral pain medications that could have more side effects
- Few complications

Risks and potential complications
Complications are rare, but can occur with any anesthesia procedure. They can include:
- Failure to relieve pain — in this case, other methods of pain management would be used
- Bleeding or bruising
- Infection at the injection site
- Damage to nerves
- Allergy to the medication used
- Death (extremely rare)

Alternatives
- Pain medication taken by mouth
- Pain medication given through an IV (intravenous line)
How is the nerve block given?
A peripheral nerve block is usually given by an anesthesiologist, a doctor who specializes in controlling pain during surgery. The doctor will inject numbing medication around the nerves that control movement, pain, and feeling. Depending on the type of surgery you’re having, the peripheral nerve block can be given:

- As a single injection (shot). An injection will control pain from a few hours up to 36 hours.
- Through a catheter. A catheter is a thin tube inserted near the nerve. Medication is pumped slowly and continuously through the catheter into the tissue near the nerve. A catheter can be used to control pain for a longer period of time. If you have a catheter, you may go home with it.

What can I expect?
Getting a nerve block is usually no more painful than getting an injection or an IV. This is what you can expect:

When it’s placed
- In most cases, the nerve block will be placed before your surgery, while you are awake. This allows you to tell your doctor what you feel, and makes the nerve block safer.
- In children, the nerve block is usually placed when the child is asleep.

How it’s placed
- The doctor may numb your skin with an injection before placing the nerve block.
- You may also be given a mild sedative to help you relax.
- Your doctor may use an ultrasound or other machines to help position the nerve block in the right place.

How you’ll feel
- The limb may feel numb, tingly, or heavy as the nerve block takes effect.
- You may be given additional pain medication to control pain in other parts of your body.

What do I need to do after surgery?
Ask your doctor when you can expect the nerve block to wear off. While it’s in effect you won’t be able to feel anything in the area. That means you’re at greater risk for injury or falls. These are ways you can protect yourself:

Don’t try to use your limb until the block wears off.
- If the nerve block was in your leg, DO NOT put weight on it. Don’t try to get up or to walk. You could easily fall and injure yourself. Even if you’re using crutches, ask someone for help until the nerve block has worn off.
- If you need to get out of bed, be sure to call for assistance.
- If the nerve block was in your arm or shoulder, you will be given a sling to wear. Keep wearing it until the block has worn off (or longer if your doctor says to).

Reposition yourself.
- While resting, reposition yourself from time to time. This will help prevent you from putting too much pressure on one area. You may need help to do this.

Ask for help.
- While you’re in the hospital, your nurses will help you. Once you go home, make sure someone is nearby who can help.
  - If the nerve block was in your leg or foot, ask for help getting to the bathroom or getting anything you need.
  - If the nerve block was in your shoulder or arm, don’t try to hold or carry anything with that arm. Someone should help you.

When to call for help
Call your doctor or nurse right away if you experience any of the following:
- Severe or prolonged shortness of breath.
- Pain that you can’t control.