

LUMBAR SYMPATHETIC NERVE BLOCKS - INFORMATION FORM

What are sympathetic blocks?

Some chronic pain conditions may be due to abnormal function of nerves called sympathetic nerves. These nerves are part of the nervous system which control things like sweating, blood vessel calibre, heart rate, and many other automatic functions of the body. Many pain nerves run with these sympathetic nerves, and it is possible, but by no means certain, that in some pain states they function abnormally and carry pain.

Your doctor may suggest an injection to block these nerves as a way of trying to help clarify and treat the cause of your pain, or to treat inadequate blood supply if you have been referred by a vascular surgeon. Injections may comprise local anaesthetic to temporarily numb them, or if it is being given for inadequate blood supply, phenol will be used to knock them out for a longer time. The phenol block may also be referred to as a (Chemical) Sympathectomy

What does it involve and will it hurt?

The procedure is usually done as an outpatient but you will spend about an hour or a little longer in the hospital. Do not eat or drink for 2 hours prior to your appointment. You will be lying either on one side or on your stomach. The skin will be sterilised with iodine or a similar solution. The injection will be done under X-ray control as the sympathetic nerves run in front of the vertebral column and are deep in the back. It can be a little uncomfortable in your back at the time of the injection, although local anaesthetic will be used to numb the surface first.

You may have a small tube (cannula) placed in your arm beforehand.

What are the potential complications?

With any operation or injection procedure there are some potential

side effects and complications, most of which relate to the way the injection is given.

The needle may occasionally enter a blood vessel or a deep muscle, causing a bruise. It is also theoretically possible that a nerve could be damaged. In the procedure, the needle is inserted very slowly, and if the lining around the nerve was touched there would be pain in the leg. The doctor would then change the position of the needle slightly to avoid any risk or damage to the nerve. However the needle used is very slender and is unlikely to cause any permanent damage.

There may be a temporary increase in pain, related to the volume of substance injected. If phenol is used, it can cause some flank pain. Phenol can also cause muscle damage if it is injected in the wrong place. Dye which is visible on the X-ray screen is used to help guide the needle position and so reduce the chance of this happening.

Sometimes a patient's blood pressure falls after the injection. If so, the doctor will use the venous cannula inserted so that the blood pressure can be controlled by intravenous fluids or medication if necessary.

As with any injection through the skin, it is possible for bacteria to gain entry causing an infection. The risk of this is very small.

Finally, it is also possible for patients to be allergic to the medications involved but again this is very unlikely. You may experience a hot flush or develop a rash. However, this should get better within a few hours or days.

Repetitions

Phenol blocks for vascular disease are done for pain at rest or with activity because of inadequate blood flow. They can also be repeated but should last at least 6 –18 months.

Are there any special instructions?

Once the procedure is completed you will be kept for about ½ an hour and then allowed home. You should be accompanied home by a responsible adult and may eat or drink normally afterwards. There is no restriction on movement and you do not need to spend any further amount of time lying down.

Should you feel unwell after the procedure contact WRPMS during office hours Monday – Friday. Otherwise contact your doctor or the after hours surgery.

IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PROCEDURE OR INFORMATION YOU HAVE JUST READ, PLEASE ASK THE NURSING STAFF OR YOUR DOCTOR WHO WILL BE MORE THAN HAPPY TO ANSWER ANY QUESTIONS YOU MAY HAVE.

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