

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 automatic body functions such as sweating, heart rate and blood vessel contraction to list a few. Many pain nerves are located alongside these sympathetic nerves and it is possible (although not certain) that in some pain states these sympathetic nerves may function abnormally and carry pain signals.

Your doctor may suggest an injection to try and block these abnormal sympathetic nerves as a way of trying to help clarify and treat the cause of your pain. Sometimes the pain is caused by reduced blood flow through the vessels by the nerve, in this case an injection will still help but different medication will be used.

Before your sympathetic block

You will need to come in to hospital to have your sympathetic block. You will need to fast before the procedure – you should not eat for 6 hours before the procedure and after that should only have clear fluids (water) up until two hours before your appointment time at the hospital.

If you have a 1pm appointment this will mean a light breakfast before 7am and clear fluids up until 11am. This is because you will be lying on your stomach during the procedure and we may wish to give you a strong sedative medication.

You should take all your medication as normal, apart from diabetic medicine and anti-coagulants. Your blood must be clotting normally to have this procedure safely. You must advise the pain service of any diabetic or blood thinning medication that

you take and we will advise you (and your doctor/s if appropriate) on what you need to do.

When you arrive to hospital you will be met by a staff nurse. A fine tube will be placed in a vein in your arm (IV cannula) before your procedure. This may be used to give you fluid and medications.

The sympathetic block is performed under X-ray control in the radiology department. The doctor will use a cleaning solution on your skin on your back.

Some local anaesthetic (numbing medication) will be injected into your skin. This will sting a little at first and then you will feel numb. A slightly larger needle is then introduced through the numb area to reach the sympathetic block. At this time more x-rays will be taken to check the position of this needle. Once it is in the right place nerve block medication will be injected.

Please let your doctor know if you find this uncomfortable at any time.

Possible complications

Bruising: As with any injection some bruising around the injection site may occur. This is normal and will heal within a few days or a week. When the bruising occurs in the deeper muscles you may experience some aching type pain. Please take oral pain relief as directed by your doctor to control this.

Low blood pressure: Sometimes your blood pressure may drop after the injection. We may treat this by giving you fluids through the tube in your arm (IV fluids). A low blood pressure may cause you to feel light headed or sickly.

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Pain: There may be a temporary increase in pain, this is related to the volume of medication injected. The process of checking positioning with x- rays can help reduce the chance of this happening.

Infection: As with any injection through the skin there is the chance of bacteria gaining entry causing an infection. This is why the doctor will use a cleaning solution on your skin first.

Allergy: It is possible you may have an allergic reaction to the medication used. This is an extremely rare occurrence. If it does happen you may feel hot, have a swollen tongue or develop a rash. Please tell your doctor immediately if any of these symptoms occur.

After your procedure

A sympathetic block is usually completed as an outpatient. This means you will be able to go home on the same day as your procedure. You should plan for a responsible adult to collect you from hospital when you are ready to leave, we do not recommend you drive yourself home or take public transport. It is a good idea to have someone available to support you once you are at home, for the first day at least.

Note

The procedure cannot be performed if you have an active infection, flu, cold, fever, other unstable illness, very high blood pressure or if your blood is not clotting normally. This is for your safety!

Contact us

Wellington Regional Pain Service
Department of Anaesthesia
Phone: 04 385 5344

Or you can contact **HealthLine**, a free health information service. 0800 611 116