

# Looking after your arm after a Brachial Plexus Nerve Block

Anaesthetic Department



Patient information leaflet

This leaflet explains how to look after your arm following a Brachial Plexus Nerve Block and what to expect.

## **What is a nerve block?**

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A nerve block is a safe and effective form of anaesthesia involving an injection of local anaesthetic around the nerves supplying a specific region of the body. This causes numbness in that region of the body so allowing an operation to be performed pain free with you awake or sedated. Whilst you may be aware of movement, there is no pain. A nerve block is also often used in combination with a general anaesthetic in order to provide you with good pain relief after the operation.

## **Why have a Brachial Plexus nerve block?**

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Surgery on the shoulder or arm can cause considerable pain in the first 24 hours after the operation. One of the most effective ways of relieving this pain is to perform a Brachial Plexus Nerve Block. We will often refer to this procedure simply as a 'block'. As the area will be numb, your operation can then be done under a block alone, or in combination with sedation or a general anaesthetic.

## **What will my arm be like after the block?**

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After the block, the arm will remain numb and heavy for up to 24 hours, although this is very variable (on average 10-12 hours, although can be anywhere between 4-24 hours). During this time, it is important that you look after your arm as you may either injure it without realising, or find yourself unable to perform normal tasks. You may need someone around to help you look after yourself.

## How should I care for my arm following the procedure?

### **Do:**

- Keep your arm in a sling to support and protect it until the numbness wears off. You may not be fully aware of the position of your arm so you could injure it without noticing. If your arm is quite swollen, or your particular operation requires it, you may find it more comfortable to continue to wear the sling for longer.
- Take your painkillers by mouth regularly 'by the clock' rather than waiting until the sensation comes back. When it does come back, it does so quite quickly and it is better to have the painkillers on board and working at this stage so you will be comfortable once the block wears off.
- Take extra care handling hot drinks and food as these could spill onto the arm causing scalds and burns.
- Take extra care around young children and pets who may not understand the arm is numb and could accidentally cause damage
- Take care arranging your pillows when you sleep so that you are unlikely to roll over onto your arm when asleep.

### **Don't :**

- Attempt to drive or operate heavy machinery or domestic appliances.
- Rest your arm near a fire or radiator – you may not be able to feel whether or not it is too hot.
- Allow your arm to be put in a place where it might get accidentally injured.

## How do I know if there is a problem?

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When the block starts to wear off, you may feel a 'pins and needles' sensation; similar to what you may have felt when the block was put in. This is normal and will gradually disappear as the sensation comes back.

Please use the contact numbers below if you should develop any of the following symptoms:

- Unexplained shortness of breath
- Numbness lasting longer than 24-48 hours
- Severe pain that is not controlled by your painkillers
- Swelling of your fingers

Please refer to the leaflet '*Brachial Plexus Nerve Blocks for Upper Limb Surgery*' for more information.

## Other sources of information

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1. "Nerve damage associated with peripheral nerve blockade"  
(see [www.rcoa.ac.uk](http://www.rcoa.ac.uk))
2. "Risks associated with your anaesthetic" (see [www.rcoa.ac.uk](http://www.rcoa.ac.uk))
3. ASRA Practice Advisory on Neurologic Complications in Regional Anaesthesia and Pain Medicine. [http://www.asra.com/publications/Article\\_of\\_the\\_month-Sept\\_\\_2008.pdf](http://www.asra.com/publications/Article_of_the_month-Sept__2008.pdf)
4. RA-UK website, information video for patients  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEId1b2\\_KSw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEId1b2_KSw)







## Contact details

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**Who to call for help – 01483 571122 via switchboard and ask for:**

### Inpatients

- Orthopaedic Pre-Assessment
- Clinical Fellow Regional Anaesthesia/Anaesthetic Registrar on call

### Outpatients

- Anaesthetic Department – 9am to 5pm
- **Out of hours** – Anaesthetic Registrar on call

### Anaesthetic Department

Royal Surrey County Hospital NHS Foundation Trust  
Egerton Road, Guildford GU2 7XX

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### PALS and Advocacy contact details

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Contact details of independent advocacy services can be provided by our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) who are located on the right hand side as you enter the main reception area. PALS are also your first point of contact for health related issues, questions or concerns surrounding RSCH patient services.

**Telephone:** 01483 402757

**Email:** [rsc-tr.pals@nhs.net](mailto:rsc-tr.pals@nhs.net)

**Opening hours:** 9.00am–3.00pm, Monday to Friday

If you would like information documents in large print, on tape or in another language or form please contact PALS.

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Author: Louisa Chrisman

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