About the anaesthetic for your hand operation

Information for patients, relatives and carers

For more information, please contact:
Day Unit
Tel: 01904 726010

The York Hospital, Wigginton Road, York, YO31 8HE
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About the anaesthetic for your hand operation

You have provisionally agreed to have your surgery by an injection to numb your arm rather than a general anaesthetic. This leaflet explains how your anaesthetist will numb your arm in some more detail.

The benefits of this method over general anaesthetic include:

- you will have less pain for several hours and be able to think clearly immediately after the operation
- it is very unlikely that you will feel sick following the operation
- you will be able to eat, drink and go home sooner than if you had a general anaesthetic.

After you arrive on the Day Unit your anaesthetist will meet you to answer any questions you may have about this.
Why can’t I eat or drink before the operation?

There is a slight possibility that you will need to have a general anaesthetic for your operation if the injections do not fully numb your arm. For safety reasons you must have an empty stomach before a general anaesthetic.
How will my arm become numb?

Your heartbeat and blood pressure will be checked in the anaesthetic room. Your anaesthetist will put a small needle (a drip) in the back of the hand we are not operating on. This allows us to give you some medicine that makes you relaxed and comfortable.

To make your arm numb we need to inject local anaesthetic beside the four main nerves that run to your hand. We may numb these nerves either in the armpit or behind the collar bone. To help us find the nerves, we may use an ultrasound machine and occasionally a machine that will make your arm twitch. It can take a little time to position the needle correctly. You may feel a shooting sensation down your arm whilst this is happening, and it is important to let the anaesthetist know so that the needle can be repositioned. When we are happy that everything is positioned correctly, the local anaesthetic is injected.

It takes about 20 to 40 minutes for your arm to become numb. It will also feel heavy and difficult to move. It may be so numb that you are no longer aware what position the arm is resting in without looking at it.

In about one in five cases your arm may not be fully numb after the first injection so you may need an extra injection around your elbow or hand.
Are there any side effects to having a local anaesthetic?

It is very uncommon to feel unwell due to the injection but please tell us if you do. This could be due to the presence of the local anaesthetic in the bloodstream or, very rarely, an allergy to the local anaesthetic.

Occasionally the injections around the collar bone can affect other nerves which mean you could have a hoarse voice, small pupil, slightly pink eye or a weak eyelid. This should only last for a few hours. Another rare complication of injections around the collarbone is damage to the lung, though this is extremely rare now that we use ultrasound to help place the needle.

Additionally, as with any injection, there is the rare risk of bruising or infection at the place where the needle is put in.
Are there any serious risks to this procedure?

Nerve injury following surgery is rare. You may experience a numbness or (rarely) tingling, weakness or pain that lasts longer than the block should have done; longer than 48 hours. However, the vast majority of these problems resolve quickly with time; only 2% remain at three months, less than 1% at six months, and less than one in five hundred at a year. Long lasting or permanent nerve damage is very rare; recent reports suggest in the range of 2 to 4 per 10,000 patients.

It is important to let us know if there are any problems following your surgery. We may be able to help with weakness or numbness that does not resolve, or with painful or troublesome tingling.

If, at 48 hours following the surgery, you have shooting pains going down the arm or weakness that does not get better or that worsens again later, please get in contact with the Acute Pain Team during working hours. Numb patches on the hand or arm usually resolve with time, but if they are still present at six weeks after the operation, you should mention this either at follow-up with the surgeon, or by calling the Acute Pain Team, contact details on page 8.
What happens after the operation?

Food and drink will be offered to you very soon after the operation. Before you go home we will advise you about taking painkillers and looking after yourself.

Your arm will probably stay numb for four to eight hours and some areas may stay numb for 24 hours.

Because you will not be able to move or feel your arm you will need to protect it with a sling and move it with your other hand.
Contact details

If you have any problems as detailed previously, please contact;

The Acute Pain Team on 01904 725512.

If no one is in the office, the answering machine is checked regularly and we will call you back if you leave your details.
Tell us what you think

We hope that you found this leaflet helpful. If you would like to tell us what you think, please contact Dr Harry Murgatroyd, Consultant Anaesthetist, The York Hospital, Wigginton Road, York, YO31 8HE or telephone 01904 725399.

Teaching, Training and Research

Our Trust is committed to teaching, training and research to support the development of staff and improve health and healthcare in our community. Staff or students in training may attend consultations for this purpose. You can opt-out if you do not want trainees to attend. Staff may also ask you to be involved in our research.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

Patients, relatives and carers sometimes need to turn to someone for help, advice or support. Our PALS team is here for you.

PALS can be contacted on 01904 726262, or via email at pals@york.nhs.uk

An answer phone is available out of hours.