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# **A PATIENTS GUIDE TO: SYMPATHETIC BLOCKS**

## **Sympathetic block**

### **What are the sympathetic nerves?**

The sympathetic nerves run on the front surface of the spinal column (not in the spinal canal with the nerves from the central nervous system). The sympathetic nerves are part of the autonomic nervous system which basically controls functions. In other words, the autonomic nervous system is responsible for controlling things people do not have to think about or have direct control concerning their function. However, there is a connection between the central and autonomic nervous systems. Sometimes arm or leg pain is caused by a malfunction of the autonomic system secondary to an injury.

### **What is a sympathetic nerve block and why is it helpful?**

A sympathetic nerve block involves injecting medicine around the sympathetic nerves in a lumbar or cervical area. By doing this, the system is temporarily blocked in hopes of reducing or eliminating pain. If the initial block is successful, then additional blocks are generally repeated in 7-10 days and repeated again until the pain diminishes.

### **What happens during the procedure?**

An IV may be started. The patient is placed on the X-ray table on their back for a cervical block and on their stomach for a lumbar block. The skin on the neck or the skin on the low back is scrubbed using sterile scrub (soap). Next, the physician numbs a small area of skin with numbing medicine. This medicine may sting for a few seconds. After the numbing medicine has been given time to be effective, the physician directs a very small needle, using x-ray guidance to the area of the sympathetic nerves. A small amount of contrast (dye) is injected to insure proper needle position. Then, a small mixture of numbing medicine (anesthetic) and anti-inflammatory (steroid) is injected.

### **What happens after the procedure?**

Immediately after the procedure, the patient will go back to the recovery area where they are monitored for 15-30 minutes. The recovery room nurse checks the patient periodically to see if they get good arm/hand or good leg/foot warming. Patients are then asked to report the percentage of pain relief and record the relief experienced during the next week.

The arm(s) or leg(s) may feel weak or numb for a few hours. This is fairly common and happens following a sympathetic nerve block.

### **General Pre/Post Instructions**

Patients can eat a light meal within a few hours before the procedure. If a patient is an insulin dependent diabetic, they must not change their normal eating pattern prior to the procedure. Patients may take their routine medications. (i.e. high blood pressure and diabetic medications).

**PLEASE NOTIFY THE PHYSICIAN IMMEDIATELY IF YOU HAVE A HISTORY OF A BLEEDING DISORDER OR IF YOU TAKE BLOOD THINNERS (COUMADIN, ASPIRIN, NSAIDS)**

**PLEASE NOTIFY THE PHYSICIAN IMMEDIATELY IF YOU HAVE AN ALLERGY TO IV DYE**

Risks Of Procedure

- -Overall complications are extremely rare
- -Increased discomfort for approximately 2-3 days following the test
- -Nerve damage
- -Seizure
- -Infection
- -Bleeding
- -Discitis
- -Abscess
- -Hemorrhage
- -Allergy to medication
- -Nerve damage
- -No improvement
- -Paralysis
- -Death
- -Worsening of condition
- -Equipment failure
- -Soreness lasting 5-7 days
- -Elevated blood sugar
- -Bruising at or around injection site

**THESE RISKS ARE INTENDED TO BE A COMMUNICATION OF THE MOST REASONABLE EXPECTED COMPLICATIONS OF THE PROCEDURE AND DO NOT INCLUDE ALL CONCEIVABLE CONSEQUENCES OF THE PROCEDURE**

Discharge Care

- The area injected may be tender or bruised after the injection. Apply ice on and off every 4 hours for 24 hours
- You may not drive for the remainder of the day after the procedure. An adult must be present to drive you home. This is for your safety
- No restrictions on your diet
- Continue routine medications as prescribed. You may take your usual pain medication the day of the procedure
- Notify the Physician on any signs of infection at injection site and if fever develops
- No restrictions on bathing but be careful
- Diabetics may experience elevated blood glucose levels if steroids are given
- Keep a record of any significant changes in your pain and activity level. This information is valuable to the Physician in evaluating your treatment plan
- You should be able to return to work the next day unless there are complications
- Notify the Physician of any new respiratory difficulties
- You may have temporary numbness, heaviness or weakness at the injection site down into the thighs/arms
- Keep dressings clean and dry