

All About Pain Blocks

Pain Blocks: What Are They?

Pain Blocks are injections of medication(s) around nerves, into joints, or muscles to provide pain relief or help diagnose the source of pain.

Types of Pain Blocks

◆ Trigger Point Blocks

If you can identify a small area of the body that is tender and feels like a 'knot'—this area may be known as a trigger point. In other words, this area may be the spot that triggers your pain. These trigger areas may be seen in people with fibromyalgia, tension headaches, myofascial pain, or as a consequence of another injury such as in injuries to the back or other areas of the body.

This trigger area can be made less painful with an injection. Injection success is often enhanced by performing daily stretching of the injection area.

How are they done?

Many different substances have proven beneficial for trigger point injections. Typically bupivacaine or ropivacaine, long acting forms of local anesthetics, are combined with a form of cortisone such as triamcinolone or betamethasone. Some studies even show that 'dry needling' -that is acupuncture like placement of a needle without injecting anything- can be beneficial. The needles used are much smaller than used to draw blood. While no injection is pleasant, most patients look forward to these injections as they can provide immediate pain relief.

◆ Epidural Blocks

What do they treat?

Epidural blocks in pain management are similar to the epidurals used by anesthesiologists to control labor pain when having a baby. In chronic pain management, epidurals are used to relieve severe back or neck pain. The epidural can eliminate or postpone the need for surgery. Generally accepted medical reasons to have an epidural block include back pain with pain going down the leg, or neck pain

with pain going down the arm, pain in the neck or back unresolved with surgery, or pain refractory to other therapies.

How are they done?

The person is placed on blood pressure, pulse and oxygen monitors. He curls his back, bringing the knees up toward the chest while sitting or laying on his side. Numbing medicine is given for the skin, and a special needle is used to find the space just outside the sack of fluid that surrounds the spinal cord. This is done primarily by feel, and is the reason Doctors refer patients to practiced anesthesiologists for the epidural, as it is a common anesthetic technique in the operation room. A sample dose of medication is injected to test for proper placement, followed by an injection of a cortisone type medication. known as a steroid, into the epidural space.

How do they work?

There are several theories behind epidural steroid injections. First, it is important to know that the steroid injected is not the same steroid that bodybuilders take, but a powerful anti-swelling drug. This drug may simply reduce swelling of irritated nerves and adjacent tissues, and thus reduce pain. The steroid may stay active in the injection area for 1-3 weeks. There is another theory that simply believes the injection itself washes out irritating molecules from the ruptured inside of the disc. While in most instances one epidural is all that is indicated, at times, a series of three epidurals may provide best results.

What is the success rate?

There have been many studies performed, however they have been done on patients with back pain of differing duration, and dose of injection. A reasonable estimate is that relief for 6 months is probably in the 60% range. The longer the pain before the injection, the lower the success rate. Typically, pain relief starts at 2-3 days after the injection.

◆ Nerve Blocks

What can they do?

Peripheral nerve blocks can help pinpoint the source of pain. They can also treat pain at the same time. Nerve blocks can treat pain as diverse as headaches, nerve damage such as a from cancer or

neuroma growth after surgery, pain from **shingles**, known as *post herpetic neuralgia*, or reflex sympathetic dystrophy- a condition of intense skin pain with even the slightest touch.

Many different techniques and medications are used, depending on the purpose and location of the block.

◆ **Blocks: What are the risks?**

Risks fall into two major categories:

1. Damage the needle can cause, like bleeding, infection and injury to structures the needle contacts
2. Immediate reaction to the medications given, including allergic reactions or drug side effects.

For most blocks at *Newport Pain Management*, you will be asked to bring a driver with you, as numbing medicine in a block can temporarily weaken a muscle or reflex and leave you unprotected in an emergency.

I heard cortisone was harmful, is this true?

Anti-inflammatory steroids such as are used in some pain blocks, are not the same as those used by body builders. They are synthetic versions of natural steroids made by the body. They can however cause temporary blood sugar elevations in diabetics, water retention for a few days, and if given in multiple doses, suppression of the body's normal production of these natural steroids.

How can the risks be minimized?

1. Make sure your Doctor is board certified. Anesthesiologists are physicians specifically trained in the science of pain relief.
2. Make sure your Doctor has the necessary backup equipment like defibrillators, emergency drug carts, suction, and oxygen to treat problems if they arise. You can be assured of this if your block is performed in a surgicenter facility.