

## How long will my arm be numb for?

Your arm will be numb for anywhere between four and 24 hours. We will provide you with a sling to go home with until you are able to move your arm again.

## What should and shouldn't I do whilst my arm is numb?

**Please follow these simple dos and don'ts until the block has fully worn off:**

### Do:

- Use your sling (even whilst you are sleeping) until your arm has regained its normal feeling and movement.
- Keep your arm well protected.
- Start taking your painkillers regularly as prescribed to ensure that you don't experience significant pain as the block wears off.

### Don't:

- Use any heavy machinery.
- Rest your arm near a fire or radiator as you will not notice it burn.
- Place your arm anywhere that it may be injured.

### Important information:

Please go to your nearest accident and emergency (A&E) department if you develop unexplained shortness of breath, or pain that is not well controlled by the painkillers you have been given.

If your arm is still numb or if you have any unusual feelings in it 48 hours after your surgery, please call **020 7188 0652** during normal working hours.

## Further information

### Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

**t:** 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

### Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

To make comments or raise concerns about the Trust's services, please contact PALS.

**t:** 020 7188 8801 at St Thomas'

**t:** 020 7188 8803 at Guy's **e:** [pals@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@gstt.nhs.uk)

### Language Support Services

**t:** 020 7188 8815 **fax:** 020 7188 5953

# Brachial plexus block

## For shoulder, elbow, arm and hand surgery



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## What is the brachial plexus?

The brachial plexus is the bundle of nerves that supplies your shoulder, arm and hand with feeling and movement.

## What is a brachial plexus block?

This is a numbing technique where the anaesthetist injects local anaesthetic close to where the nerves run through your neck or shoulder (see Figure 1 below). This results in you temporarily losing the feeling and movement in your arm.

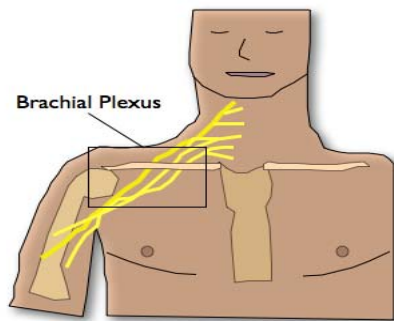


Figure 1

## How is the brachial plexus block done?

You will be given the local anaesthetic in the theatre suite under close monitoring. The anaesthetic is injected either into the neck, near the collarbone, or into the armpit using an ultrasound machine for accuracy. Most people find that the injection itself feels similar to having a blood test. Occasionally, you might experience some electrical sensations in your hand or arm while the injection is being carried out.

## What will I feel like once I have had the injection?

Once you have been injected with the anaesthetic, your arm will start to feel warm, heavy and then numb. The numbing effect of the local anaesthetic may take between 20 and 40 minutes to work. When your arm is completely numb, your operation can begin.

## What are the benefits of having a brachial plexus block?

The brachial plexus block provides excellent pain relief. This means that for certain forearm and hand procedures, the operation can often be performed whilst you are awake, allowing you to avoid a general anaesthetic and its side effects. This can also mean that you are able to leave hospital quicker.

The pain relief offered by a brachial plexus block often persists after the operation has finished, allowing you to have physiotherapy which can aid your recovery.

## What can I do during the operation?

Some patients listen to their own portable music devices via headphones. Others listen to the music playing in theatre.

Some people prefer to have a conversation with their anaesthetist whilst they are having their operation.

## What are the risks / side effects?

### Problems with the anaesthetic:

Occasionally the block may fail to provide complete anaesthesia. If this happens, we can supplement a partially working block with local anaesthetic to ensure complete numbness. If required, a general anaesthetic can also be given.

**Bruising:** All injections can cause bruising, however, this can be minimised by applying pressure to the injection site.

### Injections in the base of the neck:

Injections here may cause you to experience droopy eyelids and/or a hoarse voice. These will disappear when the block wears off.

**Injections around the collar bone:** A very small number of patients (less than one in 1000) experience damage to their lungs. The likelihood is reduced by using the ultrasound.

**Nerve damage:** Less than one in 10 patients may notice an area of persisting numbness or altered sensation in the arm, shoulder or hand, which can last up to six weeks. The risk of permanent nerve damage is very rare (between one in 2,000 and one in 5,000 patients). The risk of nerve damage is present in any operation regardless of the type of anaesthetic. This can be due to positioning during the operation or the use of the tourniquet (a tight band placed around the upper arm to prevent bleeding during the operation).

Extremely rarely, fitting or life-threatening complications may occur.