Phenol injection for the treatment of pain

This leaflet explains more about phenol injections, including the benefits, risks and any alternatives. It also provides information on what you can expect when you come to hospital. If you have any more questions, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.

What is a phenol injection?
Phenol is an oily substance that has been used in the treatment of chronic pain for many decades. It is used for pain that is difficult to control by conventional methods such as painkillers. Phenol injections can destroy the nerves that are known to transmit pain signals, this can result in long-term pain relief. This is achieved by injecting the phenol around the nerves.

Before this substance is used, your doctor may need to perform a test of the nerve that is intended to be treated. This involves injecting a temporary local anaesthetic to numb the nerve that is believed to transmit the pain signals. After injecting the local anaesthetic, you should get a significant amount of pain relief and an area of your body may lose the ability to sense touch and become numb. If the pain relief is achieved and the numbness tolerated your doctor may go ahead and perform the full procedure.

What types of pain can this be used for?
The use of phenol to relieve pain is reserved only for a very small number of painful conditions. These conditions depend on the painful area having a nerve supply that can be safely destroyed. These nerves are usually restricted to those that are involved in sensation. Nerves which are involved in movement are not suitable as their destruction would result in paralysis.

The main benefit is that the phenol causes destruction to the nerves injected and this can result in long-term pain relief.

Your doctor will need to discuss what nerve is intended to be injected, and this will be different depending on where you have the pain.

Are phenol injections the right treatment for me?
Other treatment options will be discussed with you before deciding to go ahead with the phenol injection, and your consent will be needed. The decision on whether or not to go ahead with the injection is a shared decision between you and your doctor. Your doctor will be able to provide you with information about the likelihood of this being a successful treatment for you, and how this treatment fits into your care. Please speak to your doctor for more information.
If your health has changed, it is important to let the department know prior to the procedure.

- If you have an infection in your body, your doctor will postpone the treatment until the infection has cleared.
- If you have started anticoagulant or antiplatelet medicines that thin the blood, such as warfarin, rivaroxaban, heparin or clopidogrel, this may require extra preparation.
- If you have any allergies.

You must also inform the doctor if there is any chance that you could be pregnant.

If you are planning to fly or travel abroad within two weeks of the injections, please let your doctor know as it may be best to change the date of the injections.

**What are the risks?**

Nerve destruction is usually reserved for pain as a result of cancer, but in rare conditions it can be used in pain that is not cancer related. This is because the destruction of the nerve is irreversible.

Although in the majority of cases the nerve stops sending signals, the destruction of a nerve can result in the nerve becoming more sensitive to pain. This is called deafferentation and the resulting pain can be extremely difficult to treat. It is important that you discuss with your doctor and understand this specific risk as it can result in your pain becoming worse. This risk is dependent on the nerves injected.

Other risks may include:

- mild local tenderness and/or bruising at the site of the injection, that usually settles over the first few days
- infection. This is rare. You should seek medical help if there is local warmth or redness over the site of injection with tenderness and/or you feel hot and unwell. This may require antibiotic treatment.
- an allergic reaction to the medication.
- very rarely, some of the injected phenol may enter your circulatory system, which may cause serious heart, breathing or kidney difficulties. This would require immediate management by the healthcare team.
- nerve injury at another site caused by unintended spread of the phenol to neighbouring areas.
- injection treatments are not always effective and may not help your pain.

**Giving my consent (permission)**

We want to involve you in decisions about your care and treatment. If you decide to go ahead, you will be asked to sign a consent form. This states that you agree to have the treatment and you understand what it involves.

If you would like more information about our consent process, please speak to a member of staff caring for you.

**What happens during the phenol injection?**

Before the injection, your doctor will discuss the procedure with you. Your doctor will either obtain your consent before the injection, or confirm this consent if it was previously given. Not all doctors undertake these injections in exactly the same way, and the exact procedure depends on what nerve is targeted, but the following usually happen.
You may be asked to show your doctor where the painful area is and this will be marked to prevent the incorrect side from being injected. Please do not feel offended if you are asked multiple times, as we want to minimise the risk of any mistake.

- Readings such as blood pressure and pulse rate may be made.
- A cannula (small needle) may be placed in the back of your hand.
- You will be carefully positioned and the skin around the injection site will be cleaned with an antiseptic solution or spray; this can feel very cold.
- X-ray (or an alternative way of guiding the needle) will be used if necessary.
- You will feel a stinging sensation as local anaesthetic is injected to numb the skin and surrounding tissues. Your doctor will warn you of this first.
- The doctor will direct the injections to the area suspected to be a source of pain. When the injections are made, you may feel pressure, tightness or a pushing sensation. If there is any discomfort, do let the doctor know.
- You may be asked about how your pain is during the procedure and any effects of the injection.

What will happen to me after the phenol injections?

After the injection you will be taken to a recovery ward area where nursing staff will observe you. If you have had sedation you may feel a little drowsy and wish to sleep. Note that sedation is associated with increased risk and your doctor may recommend that the injection be done under local anesthetic only. You may be assisted to sit up and your blood pressure and pulse may be checked. You will be advised when to get dressed and be given assistance to help ensure that you can stand safely after the procedure. The duration of stay in recovery will vary depending on the injection done. If there is any pain from the injection you can ask for pain relief.

When will I be able to go home from hospital after my injections?

You will usually be able to return home within a few hours after the injection and in some cases much sooner, depending on how long your doctor or nurse wants you to stay for recovery. Please ensure that you have made arrangements for someone to collect you after the procedure. Failure to do this will result in your procedure being cancelled. It is unsafe for you to drive home immediately after the procedure. If you do so your motor insurance will be invalid.

What can I do after my procedure?

Ideally, you should arrange for someone to stay with you for 24 hours but, failing that, you should at least have access to a telephone. You should not drive, operate machinery, sign legal documents, provide childcare unsupervised or drink alcohol until fit to do so.

Please keep the area of the injections dry for 24 hours following the procedure. Do not worry if your pain feels worse for a few days as this sometimes happens. If there is any pain from the injection you can use simple painkillers such as paracetamol, and this pain will subside with time. If in doubt, please discuss these issues with your doctor for further advice.

When can I return to work after the procedure?

You can return to work, exercise or go on holiday as soon as you feel able to and your doctor has said you are fit enough to do so. Your consultant can advise you on this.
Will I have a follow-up appointment?
You will receive a letter with a follow-up appointment date and time. It will either be a phone call with a specialist nurse, or in clinic with a consultant. If you haven’t heard from us within 10 weeks following the procedure please contact the department on t: 020 7188 4714, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, to talk to one of the nurses.

Is there anything else I need to consider before the procedure?
- Please bring your glasses if you need them for reading.
- Always bring a list of all current medication.
- Continue to take your medication as usual on the treatment day.

Contact us
If you have any questions or concerns about the procedure, please contact the pain department on t: 020 7188 8877, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm. Please contact your GP or go to your local Emergency Department (A&E) if you have any urgent medical concerns outside these hours. They can contact our on call pain consultant via our main switchboard if they need to t: 020 7188 7188.

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets

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

Your comments and concerns
For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.
t: 020 7188 8801 (PALS) e: pals@gstt.nhs.uk
t: 020 7188 3514 (complaints) e: complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk

Language and accessible support services
If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch.
t: 020 7188 8815 e: languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk

NHS Choices
Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.
w: www.nhs.uk