



# Information for patients

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## Introduction

This booklet allows you to understand different anesthetic and pain relief choices available to you for shoulder operations.

You will get a chance to meet the anaesthetist on the day of your operation who will be happy to answer any questions regarding your anaesthetic and take into consideration your preferences.

## Having an Anaesthetic for Your Shoulder Operation

This booklet explains:

- The anaesthetic techniques commonly used for the shoulder operations
- How they work

## General Anaesthetic

For any operations, patients receive a general anaesthetic during which will make them sleep whilst having the operation.

## Regional Anaesthetic

A local anaesthetic drug is injected through a needle into the site supplying the nerves to the area that is being operated on to numb the nerves for a few hours.

## Combining General Anaesthetic with Regional Anaesthetic

For the shoulder operations the majority of anaesthetists prefer to combine regional anaesthetic with general anaesthetic. When effective, regional anaesthetic will offer excellent pain relief for the shoulder operation.

On most occasions regional anaesthetic may not be sufficient as a sole anaesthetic technique for a shoulder operation and hence it is usually combined with a general anaesthetic.

## How is the regional anaesthetic performed?

Your anaesthetist will discuss the procedure with you beforehand and will explain what is happening throughout the process.

You will meet a member of the anaesthetic team who will stay with you during your time in theatre.

A thin plastic tube (a 'cannula') will be inserted into a vein in your hand or arm.

You may be given some sedation through a drip to make you feel more relaxed and comfortable.

You may also be given oxygen to breathe via a lightweight, clear plastic mask to improve oxygen levels in your blood.

## Information for patients

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You will be lying on the trolley in a comfortable position.

A piece of electrical equipment (peripheral nerve stimulator) is used to deliver a small electric current to locate the nerves of your neck, which may make your shoulder, hand or arm twitch. Most patients do not find this uncomfortable.

Sometimes an ultrasound machine or both nerve stimulator and ultrasound machine can be used to locate the nerves.

Your anaesthetist will then inject a local anaesthetic drug.

The anaesthetist may stop the sedation if necessary and assess the effectiveness and progress of the anaesthetic.

Once the regional anaesthetic is beginning to work, you will be given a general anaesthetic by your anaesthetist.

Some anaesthetists may prefer to give you a general anaesthetic before performing a regional anaesthetic.

### **What will I feel whilst regional anaesthetic is being performed?**

If your anaesthetist is going to give you general anaesthetic before regional, then you will not feel anything described below as you are under the effect of general anaesthetic while the regional is being performed.

If you are awake or under the effect of light sedation while regional anaesthetic is being performed, you might feel some prodding while the anaesthetist is trying to locate the nerves in your neck.

As the injection is given you may feel pins and needles or a sharp tingle in your arm. If you do, try to remain still, and tell your anaesthetist about it (see side effects and complications)

When the injection is finished, the regional anaesthetic is usually effective within 10-15 minutes.

To start with, the skin feels numb to touch and the arm muscles are weak. When the anaesthetic is working fully you will be unable to move your arm or feel any pain in the arm or shoulder.

Your anaesthetist may check progress and effectiveness of the anaesthetic by using a cold spray on your arm. As the anaesthetic becomes effective, you should not be able to feel the coldness of the spray.

After this you will be given the general anaesthetic.

### **Why have a regional anaesthetic as a part of your anaesthetic?**

**You may experience the following advantages:**

- Excellent pain relief immediately after the operation
- A lighter general anaesthetic is needed which effects the heart and lungs less

## Information for patients

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- Less need for strong pain relieving drugs
- Less chance of sickness and vomiting as the pain relief is better
- Able to eat and drink earlier following surgery
- Early mobilisation of the shoulder can be started due to good pain relief. This will be helpful after certain shoulder operations

### Why is a regional anaesthetic given before a general anaesthetic by some anaesthetists?

Some anaesthetists prefer to do a regional anaesthetic while you are fully conscious or if you are under the effect of sedation when you are relaxed and drowsy but still conscious as this:

- Enables you to communicate with the anaesthetist whilst regional anaesthetic is being performed
- Enables you to let the anaesthetist know immediately if you feel any pain or pins and needles in your arm when the local anaesthetic is being injected, as pins and needles may indicate irritation or damage to a nerve and the needle will need to be repositioned (see side effects and complications)

### Can anyone have a regional anaesthetic?

A regional anaesthetic may not always be possible if the risks of complications are too high.

The anaesthetist will ask you if:

- You are taking blood thinning drugs, such as Warfarin. Warfarin and other blood thinning medications can be stopped a few days before the operation in some patients and regional anaesthetic could then be considered. Your doctor / surgeon will advise you about this
- You have a blood clotting abnormality. This may be corrected for the operation and then you will be considered for regional anaesthetic
- You have an allergy to local anaesthetics
- You have an infection in your neck area

### Side Effects and Complications of Regional Anaesthetic

As with all anaesthetic techniques there is a possibility of unwanted side effects or complications.

#### People vary in how they interpret words and numbers.

This scale is provided to help.

Very common	Common	Uncommon
1 in 10	1 in 100	1 in 1000
Rare	Very rare	

# Information for patients

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1 in 10,000      1 in 100,000

## Very Common and Common Side Effects

These may be unpleasant, but can be treated and do not last long.

### Numbness and heaviness of arm

As the regional anaesthetic takes effect, you will find your arm and shoulder getting heavy and numb. It will be difficult for you to control the movements of your arm. Overall, most people do not find these sensations unpleasant.

This happens as the anaesthetic drug works on pain nerves as well as nerves controlling muscle power. You will slowly recover from this as the effect of the anaesthetic wears off in a few hours after the operation. The time it takes to wear off will also depend on the regional anaesthetic drug used.

### Inadequate effect of regional anaesthetic

Regional anaesthetic aims to work on the entire nerve supply to the shoulder. Sometimes one or more nerves can escape the effects of the regional anaesthetic drug. This will result in inadequate anaesthetic; however having no anaesthetic effect is uncommon.

If the anaesthetist is not completely satisfied with the effect of the regional anaesthetic, they may ask surgeon to supplement the anaesthetic by using a local anaesthetic drug at the site of the operation.

The anaesthetist will also give you other painkiller medicines during the anaesthetic so that you are quite comfortable when you wake up.

### Pain during the injection

As previously mentioned, you should immediately tell your anaesthetist if you feel any pain or pins and needles in your arm when a (regional) local anaesthetic is being injected. This may indicate irritation or damage to a nerve and the needle will need to be repositioned.

## Rare Complications

### Bruising

You may have bruising in your neck due to the injection given to you for the regional anaesthetic. If bruising occurs, it usually disappears in a couple of days.

### Nerve damage

Temporary loss of sensation, pins and needles and sometimes muscle weakness may last for a few days or even weeks but, if this occurs, most patients make a full recovery in time. Permanent nerve damage leading to permanent disability is even rarer. Nerve damage could also result from a surgical procedure.

# Information for patients

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## **Systemic toxicity (high levels of local anaesthetic in blood)**

This is a rare complication. If local anaesthetic is accidentally injected into a blood vessel, or a large amount of local anaesthetic gets absorbed into your blood, it would cause loss of consciousness and may severely affect heart function.

## **Infection**

May happen at the site of injection of (regional) local anaesthetic.

## **Pneumothorax (lung puncture)**

If this complication occurs it may need treating with the insertion of a chest drain (i.e. a tube inserted in the chest to remove air trapped due to lung puncture).

## **After Your Regional Anaesthetic**

Your nurses will make sure that the numb area is protected from pressure and injury until sensation returns.

You will be given a 'sling' to support your arm which should be worn until control to muscle power in the arm comes back.

It takes a few hours for feelings (sensations) to return to the arm that is numb. Numbness may last longer depending on the anaesthetic drug which has been used. Your anaesthetist will inform you about the length of time it may take for your regional anaesthetic to wear off.

As sensation returns you may experience some tingling in the skin. At this point you may become aware of some pain from the operation site and you should ask for more pain relief or start using the Patient Controlled Analgesia (PCA) machine if you have been given one. In this way you will have some painkillers in your system before the pain becomes too obvious.

Take the painkillers on a regular basis for at least 48 hours after the operation. The nursing staff will be pleased to answer any concerns you may have.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **Do I have a choice of anaesthetic?**

Yes. Your anaesthetist will assess your overall preferences and needs for the surgery and discuss them with you. If you are anxious about a regional anaesthetic, then you can discuss this with your anaesthetist. It is usually possible to accommodate individual patients' wishes and still use a regional anaesthetic as a part of your anaesthetic.

# Information for patients

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## Can I refuse to have the regional anaesthetic?

Yes. If, following discussion with your anaesthetist, you are still unhappy about having a regional anaesthetic, you can always say no to this procedure. You will then be considered for alternative methods of pain relief including painkiller injections; tablets and Patient Controlled Analgesia (PCA) pump (please refer to the leaflet on PCA). You will never be forced to have any anaesthetic procedure you don't want.

## Where can I find out more about regional anaesthetic?

This leaflet is designed to give you a brief overview about your regional anaesthetic as a part of the anaesthetic technique for shoulder operations. If you would like more detailed information, speak to your anaesthetist or contact the anaesthetic department in the hospital.

## Useful Organisations

Some of the information in this leaflet was provided by:

The Royal College of Anaesthetists; the Association of Anaesthetists of Great Britain and Ireland

### The Royal College of Anaesthetists

Churchill House

35 Red Lion Square

London WC1R 4SG

Website: [www.rcoa.ac.uk](http://www.rcoa.ac.uk)

E-mail: [info@rcoa.ac.uk](mailto:info@rcoa.ac.uk)

Tel: 020 7092 1500 Fax: 020 7092 1730

This organisation is responsible for standards in anaesthesia, critical care and pain management throughout the UK.

### The Association of Anaesthetists of Great Britain and Ireland

21 Portland Place

London WC1B 1PY

Website: [www.aagbi.org](http://www.aagbi.org)

E-mail: [info@aagbi.org](mailto:info@aagbi.org)

Tel: 020 7631 1650 Fax: 020 7631 4352

This organisation works to promote the development of anaesthesia and the welfare of anaesthetists and their patients in Great Britain and Ireland.

## Information for patients

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### **The European Society of Regional Anaesthesia and Pain Therapy**

C/o Department of Anaesthetics  
The Alexandra Hospital  
Woodrow Drive  
Redditch  
Worcestershire B98 7UB  
Website: [www.esraeurope.org](http://www.esraeurope.org)  
Tel / Fax: 01527 512047

This organisation works to further regional anaesthesia in Europe.

You can also find more information in other leaflets at the following website:

[www.youranaesthetic.info](http://www.youranaesthetic.info)

### **Any Comments, Compliments, Concerns or Complaints**

If you have any other concerns please talk to your nurse, therapist or doctor. Our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) are available on 03033 306518 (Grimsby, Scunthorpe and Goole). You can also contact [nlg-tr.PALS@nhs.net](mailto:nlg-tr.PALS@nhs.net)

As a Trust we value equality of access to our information and services, therefore alternative formats available on request at [nlg-tr.interpreters@nhs.net](mailto:nlg-tr.interpreters@nhs.net)

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