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Information Sheet

ANAESTHESIA & PAIN RELIEF

Introduction

Fear of pain is one of the biggest barriers that we encounter in our patients. In the past, foot & ankle surgery has had a reputation for high levels of post-operative pain. At The Dorset Foot & Ankle Clinic, we can reassure all our patients that together with our expert anaesthetic colleagues, we use a wide range of measures to ease post-operative pain and make your experience as good as possible. Many of our patients are pleasantly surprised by the lack of pain experienced and we provide a number of testimonials from our patients to this effect. Most procedures are carried out under general anaesthesia often in combination with a peripheral or local anaesthetic block.

What is general anaesthesia?

During general anaesthesia you are put into a state of unconsciousness and you will be unaware of anything during the time of your operation. The anaesthetist achieves this by giving you a combination of drugs. Usually the first step is to inject medication intravenously (i.e. into a vein) through a small plastic tube, placed usually in your arm or hand. This is known as induction of anaesthesia. While you are unconscious and unaware, your anaesthetist remains with you at all times, monitoring your condition and controlling your anaesthetic. At the end of the operation, the anaesthetist will reverse the anaesthetic and you will regain awareness and consciousness in the recovery room, or as you leave the operating theatre.

For healthy patients, major complications are extremely rare. If you are a healthy patient, who is having non-emergency surgery, the risk of major complications such as severe disability, or not surviving the anaesthetic, is estimated at around 1 in 100,000 general anaesthetics. The risk increases in the very elderly, or if you have a number of other medical problems such as severe heart or lung disease.

What is a local anaesthetic block?

Local anaesthetic drugs can be injected into the skin and tissues at the site of the operation. The area of numbness will be restricted to the immediate area and lasts four to six hours. This technique is often used for minor operations but can also be used in combination with general anaesthesia to minimise post-operative pain around a wound site.

What is a peripheral nerve block?

This is an injection of local anaesthetic near the nerves which supply the area of your operation, making that area, such as a leg or foot, feel numb. In addition, the nerves to the muscles in the limb are also temporarily blocked whilst the drug is acting so that the limb becomes floppy. It may be used on its own, as the sole anaesthetic, or you may receive sedation or a general anaesthetic as well. The duration of numbness from the nerve block depends on the drug used and the site of injection but can last between 4 and 24 hours. Benefits of a nerve block may include a shorter recovery period and better pain relief after your operation. This allows you to be mobile more quickly after your operation and you may require less pain relieving medicines such as morphine.

Serious side effects after peripheral nerve blocks are rare. Symptoms lasting more than one week happen in between one and five out of every 100 nerve blocks (1–5%). The risk varies between the different blocks. The vast majority of those affected (92–97%), recover within four to six weeks. 99% of these people have recovered within a year. Permanent nerve damage is rare and precise numbers are not available. A possible estimate from the information we do have suggests it might happen in between 1 in 5,000 and 1 in 30,000 nerve blocks.

What about other forms of pain relief?

As well as using advanced techniques such as peripheral nerve blocks, you will also usually receive regular anti-inflammatory drugs, such as paracetamol and ibuprofen. Some patients do not tolerate anti-inflammatories and the actual mix of drugs given will be adjusted for each individual patient. You may also receive strong drugs, such as morphine. At discharge we will ensure that you have adequate pain killers to take when you get home.

What further information is available?

The website www.gasdocs.info, designed by our local Anaesthetists, provides more detailed information, as does the site of The Royal College of Anaesthetists www.rcoa.ac.uk.