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A04lite Pain Relief After Surgery

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This document will give you information about pain relief after surgery. If you have any questions, you should ask your GP or other relevant health professional.

Why do I need pain relief?

Operations cause pain. People who have good pain control after their operations are less likely to suffer from heart attacks, chest infections and blood clots. They also get up and about more quickly and may get home sooner.

1 Simple Painkillers

You can use drugs, such as paracetamol, anti-inflammatories and codeine or similar drugs, on their own or combined with other painkillers. Although these drugs may not completely treat your pain, if you take them regularly they reduce the amount of other painkillers you might need.

What complications can happen?

The risks with simple painkilling drugs are small.

- Paracetamol is exceptionally safe in normal doses.
- Anti-inflammatory drugs can sometimes cause stomach irritation and can make asthma worse.
- Codeine or similar drugs can make you itch, feel sick or light-headed and almost always cause some degree of constipation.

2 Morphine and Similar Drugs

For more severe pain you may be prescribed morphine or similar drugs such as pethidine, diamorphine or oxycodone.

Intravenous delivery (using a drip)

The most common intravenous delivery is a technique known as patient-controlled analgesia or PCA. This involves connecting a pump, containing the drugs, to a drip in one of your veins. When you press a button on the pump a small dose of drugs is given.

Other ways of giving morphine and similar drugs

The drugs can be given by mouth once you are eating and drinking normally. The drugs can be given by injection either under the skin or into the muscle.

What complications can happen?

- Itching
- Constipation
- Feeling or being sick
- Respiratory depression
- Confusion

3 Epidural Anaesthetic

Epidural pain relief involves inserting a fine catheter into the epidural space in your back. Most of your nerves pass through this space. Local anaesthetics and other painkilling drugs are injected down the catheter into the epidural space to numb your nerves. Sometimes the drugs are injected continuously and, if needed, the dose varied by the nurses. As well as continuous infusion you can sometimes have a button that allows you to 'top up' the epidural by giving a small, safe dose when you need it.

What complications can happen?

- Low blood pressure
- Headache
- Respiratory depression
- Seizures
- Unexpected high block
- Infection around the spine
- Cardiovascular collapse
- Nerve damage
- Blood clot around the spine
- Damage to nerves
- Paralysis or death

4 Peripheral Nerve Blocks

You may be offered a peripheral nerve block to provide pain relief after an operation on your arm or leg. A peripheral nerve block is a type of regional anaesthetic that involves injecting drugs near the nerves to your leg or arm, and works by temporarily numbing your nerves to give pain relief.

What complications can happen?

- Failure of the peripheral nerve block
- Allergic reaction
- Bleeding
- Nerve damage
- Local anaesthetic toxicity

Summary

There are various forms of pain relief that you may be offered after an operation. Pain relief after surgery is usually safe and effective.

Acknowledgements

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This document is intended for information purposes only and should not replace advice that your relevant health professional would give you.