



# Pain relief after orthopedic surgery

As you prepare for your surgery, it's natural to have questions and concerns about pain. How much pain will I have? Will I be able to tolerate the pain? What medicines and treatments are available to help with pain?

We have prepared this document to answer some of these questions. Your surgeon and your team of anesthesia providers and nurses want you to learn as much as you can about pain control *before* you come in for your operation. We have found that this knowledge helps ease fears and concerns. Patients who are informed about pain management and know what to expect tend to have more success managing their pain after surgery.

Please know that we are here to help. Your questions are always welcome, and we invite you to share any concerns with your surgeon, anesthesia provider, or the nurse caring for you.

## Peripheral nerve blocks

Peripheral nerve blocks are the mainstay of pain management after orthopedic surgery. Here is some information on blocks.

- The nerves to and from your arms and legs pass through "tunnels." A specially trained anesthesia provider can use an ultrasound machine to find these tunnels of nerves.
- When these nerves are treated with numbing medicine, you feel a lot less pain from the arm or the leg. This is called a peripheral nerve block.
- Before the block is given, you will receive a small injection that feels like a pinch into the skin over the area. This numbs the skin.
- The anesthesia provider then injects numbing medicine (similar to Novocain) into the tunnel containing the nerve bundle. This soaks all the nerves in the area and makes them numb. Within a few minutes, you may feel your arm or leg get heavy and numb.

### GOOD TO KNOW



**Learn all you can** about what to expect! This can help ease fears and concerns, which can make your recovery go more smoothly.

### GOOD TO KNOW



You will need help at home until the effects of your nerve block have worn off. If the block is in your leg, **do not walk without help until it wears off.** You could fall and hurt yourself.

- The block is given while you wait to go in for surgery. It usually lasts for 8-16 hours, but may last as long as 24 hours. This means it is working when you come out of surgery and for a number of hours afterward. During this period, you will feel dramatically reduced pain.
- It's important to know that the block not only takes away pain, but it also affects how the muscles work in the area near your surgery. **If you have a block affecting your leg, you need help to walk until it wears off! If you try to walk while the block is still working, you could easily fall and be injured.** If the block is in your shoulder area, you will be given a sling to wear after surgery. (Your doctor will tell you how long to wear it.) Until the block in your arm wears off, it will be difficult for you to do things that require two hands, such as opening bottles, giving yourself insulin, or dressing and undressing.
- You will also not be able to feel normal sensations of heat, cold, or pressure while the block is working. For this reason, do **not** use heating pads or hot water bottles to the area. Take great care using the stove. You could get burned and not realize it. If you've been asked to use ice to the area, check the skin under the ice frequently for signs of frostbite, such as changes in skin color to white or gray. Try not to put excess pressure on the limb with the block. For example, try not to sleep on that side until the block is worn off.

#### GOOD TO KNOW

**Plan ahead** at home and at work so you are not worrying about loved ones or job pressures after surgery. This can make a difference in your recovery!

### Medications for pain

Your team at BIDMC will be using and prescribing pain medicine that is designed to make you as comfortable as possible. In some cases, medicines are used in the hospital in addition to or instead of a nerve block. In all cases, you are given medicine to use when you get home. We try to choose medicines that will not make you overly sleepy or cause side effects such as nausea and vomiting. Be sure to let us know if there are medicines that have worked well for you in the past, or medicines that have caused bothersome side effects or other issues.

#### GOOD TO KNOW

**Keep the arm or leg where you had surgery elevated** higher than your heart as much as possible. This helps to control swelling, which in turn helps decrease pain.

**Before surgery** you may receive medicine by mouth so that it will be working when you wake up. Examples are acetaminophen (Tylenol), pregabalin (Lyrica), and gabapentin (Neurontin).

**During surgery**, your anesthesia provider may give you medicine through your intravenous (IV) line to help decrease swelling and pain after surgery. The type of medicine you are given is based on the operation you are having and other factors specific to your case.

**After surgery**, your nurses will work with you to make sure you are as comfortable as possible. You may get one or more doses of the oral pain medicine you'll use at home so we can monitor how it affects you. Other medicines may be used if needed.

### ***Pain control at home***

By planning ahead and understanding how pain medicine works, you can help make sure your recovery at home is as comfortable as possible.

### **GOOD TO KNOW**



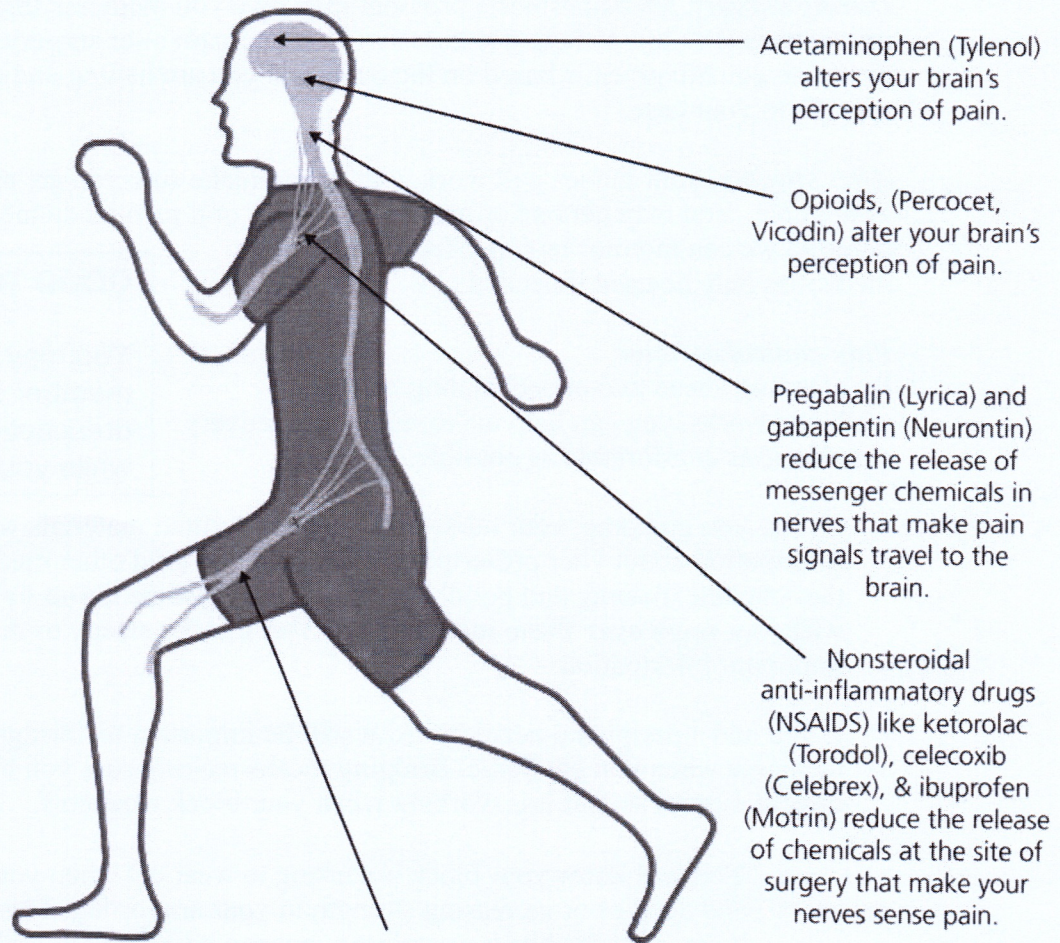
You may want a family member or friend to fill your prescriptions for pain medicine while you are in surgery.

- ♦ Before you go home, your nurse will give you written materials with a lot of information about your prescription pain medicine (and other medicines), including the schedule, dosing, and possible side effects. **It's best if you have someone else with you to go over these instructions!** You may be sleepy or distracted and miss important information.
- ♦ If you had a peripheral nerve block, it will be important to “bridge” your pain medicine when you get home. Bridging means making sure you have pain medicine in your system so that it is working when your block wears off.
  - You will know your block is starting to wear off when you start to feel pins and needles or increasing strength in your arm or leg. This is usually 8-16 hours after the block was placed, but can be as long as 24 hours. As soon as you feel the block starting to wear off, take a dose of your medicine. Take a second dose in 4-6 hours (following the specific instructions you were given).
  - Take your pain medicine before you go to sleep, even if you don't yet feel the pins and needles or return of strength. That way your medicine will be working if the block wears off while you are asleep.

*We hope this information has been helpful. Please be sure to ask any questions you may have about pain control, or share any worries.*



# information



Peripheral nerve blocks or "blocks" are procedures where a specially trained anesthesia provider places "numbing" medication around the nerves. This makes the nerves incapable of transmitting sensations to the brain. They also however reduce the transmission of signals that allow you to move muscles. Blocks last for 8-16 hours after they are placed, but can last as long as 24 hours.

*Here are some of the many ways we use medicine and treatments to help control your pain. Ask your doctor for more information.*

*This material was developed by clinicians in anesthesiology, surgery, and nursing at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center. It is produced and distributed by the Beth Israel Deaconess Learning Center. ©2015, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center. All rights reserved. LC2716 07/15*