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Sympathetic Nerve Blocks

What are the sympathetic nerves?

The sympathetic nerves run on the front surface of the spinal. The sympathetic nerves are responsible for controlling things people do not have to think about or have direct control concerning their function. Sometimes arm or leg pain is caused by a malfunction of the sympathetic nervous system secondary to an injury.

What is a sympathetic nerve block and why is it helpful?

A sympathetic nerve block involves injecting medicine around the sympathetic nerves in low back or neck area. By doing this, the system is temporarily blocked in hopes of reducing or eliminating pain. If the initial block is successful, then additional blocks are generally repeated in 7-10 days and repeated again until the pain diminishes. Sometimes, electrical impulses or nerve destroying fluids can be introduced with the goal of long term pain relief.

What happens during the procedure?

An IV will be started so that relaxation medication can be given. The patient is placed on the X-ray table on their back for a stellate sympathetic block and on their belly for other sympathetic blocks. The skin on the neck or the skin on the low back is scrubbed using 2 types of sterile scrub (soap). Next, the physician numbs a small area of skin with numbing medicine. After the numbing medicine has been given time to be effective, the physician directs a very small needle, using x-ray guidance to the area of the sympathetic nerves. A small amount of contrast (dye) is injected to insure proper needle position. Then, a small mixture of numbing medicine and cortisone/steroid is injected.

What happens after the procedure?

Immediately after the procedure, the patient will go back to the recovery area where they are monitored for 30 - 60 minutes. The recovery room nurse checks the patient periodically to see if they get good arm/hand or good leg/foot warming. Patients are then asked to report the percentage of pain relief and record the relief experienced during the next week on a post injection evaluation sheet ("pain diary"). This will be given to the patient when they are discharged home.

The arm(s) or leg(s) may feel weak or numb for a few hours. This is fairly common and happens following a sympathetic nerve block.