Patient Controlled Analgesia (PCA) for pain relief

This sheet answers common questions about Patient Controlled Analgesia (PCA) which used for pain relief after an operation. If you would like further information, or have any particular worries, please do not hesitate to ask your nurse or doctor. In all cases, a nurse or doctor will explain the procedure to you and answer any questions you may have.

Why do I feel pain?
Pain is normally a warning sign that something is wrong. Although pain after surgery is normal, if left untreated it may delay your recovery. For example, being able to cough, breathe deeply and move in comfort is very important to your recovery.

How does PCA work?
Patient-controlled analgesia (PCA) is a system that allows you to give yourself pain relief without the need for an injection. PCA consists of a machine which holds a strong painkiller and which is connected to a ‘drip’ in your arm. The machine also has a hand held button which you can press when you start to feel pain. When pressed, a small dose of a painkiller will go into your blood stream. It will start to work within minutes.

When should I use the PCA?
It is important that you keep ‘on top’ or your pain as severe pain can be difficult to treat. The PCA only gives you a small dose of painkiller, so you may need to press the button until you feel comfortable. You can use PCA in many different ways.

- Some people press the button a few minutes before they want to move or cough
- Some wait until they have pain to press the button, but don’t wait until it is too bad
- You may have to press several times to feel comfortable
- Remember that the effect of the pain killer will wear off
- You will still need to keep giving yourself doses to remain comfortable

Can I use too much?
No. The pump is specially programmed to limit the amount of painkiller you can give yourself. If you still have pain please let your nurse know.

Can I get addicted?
Many patients are worried about using strong painkillers. However they are very good at relieving pain after an operation and they are safe. You will not become addicted. Studies have shown that patients using PCA often need less medication than those receiving injections.
What are the side-effects?
As with all drugs, painkillers, like morphine, can cause unwanted effects. We cannot predict who will be affected. They can make you feel:

- Tired
- Light-headed
- Dizzy
- Produce vivid dreams
- Feel sick
- Itchy
- Constipated

None of these side-effects are serious or cause long term harm. If you are affected, in any of these ways, do tell your nurse or doctor. Medicine can be given to help sickness, itching and constipation. Milder painkillers can be given either by mouth or by suppository, at the same times as the PCA. This will reduce the amount of painkillers you need and reduce the unwanted side effects.

What if it doesn’t work?
Sometimes, patients still have some pain even after using the PCA a lot. The machine is set up to be safe for everyone, however some patients may need a larger dose. If you are in pain, please do tell your nurse.

Are there any alternatives?
Yes. If you do not want to use a PCA, or you are unhappy when you use it, there are other ways of controlling your pain. For example, it is possible:

- To stop the PCA and have regular tablets for pain
- To stop the PCA and have pain relief injections (although this is much less common)

It is very important that only YOU push the button. No one should press the button for you, not even members of your family.

The pain management team (nurses and doctors who are expert in controlling pain) may come and see you while you are using the PCA. If you want to speak to them at any time, ask your nurse to contact them.

For further information contact:

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If you would like this information in an alternative format, please don’t hesitate to ask a member of staff