

Patient Controlled Analgesia (PCA)

What Is PCA?

PCA is a system that involves a drip in your arm connected to a machine containing a supply of pain-relieving medicine (usually morphine). The machine allows you control of providing your own pain-relieving medication, hence the name "Patient Controlled Analgesia".

When Do I Receive The Medication?

When you wake up in the recovery room, the nurse will connect your PCA pump to your drip. The nurse will place an analgesia request button in your hand that you can start to use as soon as you begin to feel any discomfort.

How Does The PCA Work?

Whenever you feel discomfort or pain, you give yourself a small dose of the medication by pressing and releasing the analgesia request button. As you release the button the pump will automatically deliver a measured dose of medicine.

You are the only person allowed to press the button. This is because you are the only person who knows when you need the pain-relieving medication.

When you press and release the button the machine will make a beep noise; this tells you that you have used the button correctly. You may also hear the pump providing you with your dose of analgesia.

What Are The Advantages Of PCA?

There are three main advantages of using PCA.

- You are in control of your own pain relief
- You don't have to wait for staff to give you the pain relieving medicine
- PCA avoids the need for injections

How Often Should I Press The Button?

No-one's discomfort or pain is the same and everyone requires different amounts of the pain-relieving medication. It is important to push the button when you feel uncomfortable and not to wait until the pain has built up.

It is a good idea to push the button before doing anything you think may be uncomfortable, for example getting out of bed, having physiotherapy treatment, or undergoing a nursing procedure, it will help make things more comfortable.

Can I Give Myself Too Much Pain-Relieving Medication?

It is very unlikely that you will receive too much pain-relieving medication. Once the machine has given you a dose of analgesia it will not give you anymore, despite the fact you may continue pressing the button, for a set length of time (to ensure that the dose has worked before more is provided). The length of time is usually 5 minutes.

Are There Any Side Effects?

The analgesia can sometimes make you feel drowsy or light-headed; it can also make you feel sick, constipated or skin feel itchy. It is very important that you tell the nursing staff, so they can give you medication to help relieve this.

How Long Will I Need PCA?

The amount of time for which you will need PCA will vary depending on the type of surgery you have had, how quickly you are recovering, and how much discomfort you still have. You must be able to drink when the PCA is stopped so that it may be replaced with painkilling tablets.

There is no time limit on how long you can use a PCA for. You decide, together with the staff, when you are ready to stop using the PCA. Most patients use PCA for one or two days after their operation.

Before you stop using PCA, you will start to use tablets and perhaps pain relieving suppositories to relieve any discomfort.

Can I Walk Around Whilst Using PCA?

Yes. The machine is attached to a stand on wheels.

Can I Take Other Painkillers Whilst I Am Using The PCA?

Yes. Other painkillers will be used at the same time as your PCA. This reduces the amount of PCA medication you need and reduces its unwanted side effects.

What If I Am Still In Pain?

The ward staff will regularly monitor your pain levels after your operation but occasionally some patients still have pain despite making full use of the PCA and having other milder painkillers.

If your pain is not controlled the nurse will give you another form of painkiller and / or arrange for the surgeon or anaesthetist nurse to come and assess you.

What Are The Alternatives To Having A PCA?

You will have the opportunity to discuss the right post-operative pain relief.

The other methods of pain relief available include:

- **Tablets, Liquids & Suppositories**

If you are able to eat & drink the most convenient way to take painkillers is by mouth. We know that combinations of different types of painkillers provide the best pain relief.

- **Injections**

When patients are experiencing a lot of discomfort an injection of a strong pain killer can be given either into a muscle or vein.

- **Epidural**

Epidural analgesia is administered using a small plastic tube which is placed into the epidural space in your back.

There is a separate information leaflet about epidural analgesia available, please ask for a copy if you wish to read more.

I Prefer Not To Take Painkillers Generally, Is It Not Better To ‘Grin and Bear It’?

No. It is extremely important to have good pain relief, as it will enable you to get up and about after your operation. Complications associated with surgery such as a bad chest and bedsores can then be avoided. Good pain relief will allow you to get the rest you need to allow wound healing to take place.

The Acute Pain Team

The anaesthetist or the pain nurse may visit you after your surgery. This will give you further opportunity to ask any questions which may be worrying you and allow us to check that you are satisfied with the pain relief you are receiving.

Painkillers to Take At Home

When you are ready to be discharged from hospital the ward doctors will write a prescription for painkillers along with other medicines that they want you to continue at home.

The painkillers will work most effectively if taken regularly and if they are taken together with regular Paracetamol. You should continue the painkillers until normal day-to-day activities are comfortable.

If you are not sure about how or when to take painkillers please ask the doctor or nurse before you are discharged.

Any Other Questions?

Once you are in hospital if you have any questions do not hesitate to ask the ward staff for advice.

The ward staff may arrange for a surgeon or anaesthetist to come and speak to you.

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