

Sympathetic Nerve Block

Diagnosing the Problem

A sympathetic nerve block is a test that helps your doctor find the cause of your symptoms. During the test, medication is injected near your spine. This “blocks” the sympathetic nerves in that region. If these nerves are the cause of your problem, the injection will relieve your symptoms for a while.

Getting Ready

To get ready for the block, do the following:

- At least a week before the block, tell your doctor what medications you take (including aspirin). Ask whether you should stop taking any of them before treatment. Blood thinners must be stopped prior to this procedure.
- Tell your doctor if you are pregnant or allergic to any medication.
- Stop eating or drinking 8 hours before you check in for your block, or as directed.
- Please wear pants with an elastic waist (such as sweat pants) so any metal in the zipper will not appear in the x-rays.

During the Procedure

An IV may be given if the patient wishes to receive medication to help them relax. The nurse will position you on the table on your stomach, back or side depending on where you will be injected. During your block:

- The skin over the injection site will be cleaned.
- Fluoroscopy, which is x-ray imaging, may be used to help see where the medication goes. A contrast “dye” may be added to the medication to help get a better image.
- A local anesthetic is injected near the ganglion to numb the nerves. If the sympathetic nerves are causing your problem, the temperature in your hands or feet will rise quickly. The block will relieve your symptoms for a while.

Sympathetic nerve blocks may give long term relief from symptoms. For this treatment, a series of blocks are given 1 to 2 weeks apart.

After the Procedure

You will need a driver to drive you home after the procedure. A neck injection may cause the eyelid on that side of your face to droop a little. Your voice may also be hoarse. These things will go away in a few hours when the anesthetic wears off. Within a day or two, your hand or foot symptoms will most likely return. The injection site may also be swollen and sore for a few days. Ice for the first 24 hours at 15-20 minute intervals may help and then you may apply heat to this area for comfort.

When to call your Doctor

Call your doctor if you have trouble breathing or swallowing, prolonged hoarseness, or a fever over 101 degrees.

Risks and Complications

Risks and complications are rare, but can include:

- Infection
- Bleeding or fluid leakage in the spinal cord
- Puncture of a blood vessel
- Lung puncture (pneumothorax)

The Sympathetic Nerves

The sympathetic nervous system is a vast network of nerves throughout your body. The nerves branch from your spine and control some body functions, such as the closing of blood vessels. A problem with these nerves can affect blood flow. Symptoms are often felt in the hands or feet. They may hurt, burn, feel cold, or be tender to the touch.

Sympathetic Ganglions

The sympathetic nervous system is controlled by bunches of nerves called ganglions. One large ganglion, called the stellate ganglion, helps control nerves in the upper body. In the lower body, nerves are controlled by several ganglions that make up the sympathetic chain.

Discussing Your Results

After the procedure, you will meet with your doctor to discuss the results. Your doctor may suggest a treatment or further testing.