

Caudal block

Patient information

We have given you this factsheet because your child is due to have an operation and the anaesthetist may suggest the use of a type of pain relief called a caudal block.

What is a caudal block?

When the anaesthetist gives your child the general anaesthetic, we will also give them a pain relief medicine that goes into a vein and affects the whole body. We can also give them other pain relief medicines before or after the operation, which we can give as medicines, tablets, or occasionally other injections. However, these medicines may have side-effects which can make your child feel unwell.

A caudal block is an injection of local anaesthetic we can give your child after they are anaesthetised, which numbs the lower half of the body, from the belly button downwards. The anaesthetist injects the caudal block right at the bottom of the back. It contains local anaesthetic which 'blocks' (numbs) the nerves in the area we are operating.

It is not essential that your child has a caudal block, but it is an additional type of pain relief that can help make sure your child is very comfortable without the side-effects of strong pain relief medicines.

What are the benefits of a caudal block?

Your child is more likely to wake up without significant pain, and free of the side-effects of the stronger pain relief medicines (such as morphine) and of the general anaesthetic itself. This means that your child is likely to eat and drink sooner, and can get back to normal quicker.

Are there any alternatives?

Yes. The surgeon can place local anaesthetic close to the area of the operation. This will give a smaller area of numbness which can be effective. Alternatively, we can give your child stronger pain relief medicines into a vein, and try to prevent sickness with other medicines. You can discuss these options with your anaesthetist.

Risks and side-effects

A caudal block is a very common procedure for children having an operation. It has been shown in large studies to be extremely safe. However, as with all procedures, there are some risks and side-effects to be aware of when making a decision about whether you would like your child to have a caudal block.

Common risks:

Numb, weak or heavy legs for a short amount of time

This is due to the local anaesthetic that is used for the caudal block. It will wear off after two to 12 hours. You must supervise your child when walking or crawling, and keep them away from hot objects like radiators or hot baths.

Inadequate pain relief

Sometimes the local anaesthetic does not numb the whole area of the operation. The anaesthetist can usually tell if this has happened before your child wakes up. They will give them extra pain relief so that they wake up comfortably.

Rare risks:

Difficulty passing urine

The numbness may mean that it is difficult for your child to pass urine. A nurse may need to insert a small tube (catheter) into the bladder, but this is rare.

Infection

As with any injection, it is possible that the area can become infected. This is extremely rare, and great care is taken to make sure the skin and equipment used is sterile.

Bruising or bleeding

Sometimes, the skin around the injection site may bruise, this will soon settle. Very rarely a deeper blood clot may form, which may need further treatment to avoid nerve damage.

Reactions to local anaesthetic

These are extremely rare. Like any medicine, local anaesthetic can cause an allergic reaction. It can also enter the bloodstream or spinal fluid, which can cause a serious or life threatening reaction. The anaesthetist will take precautions against this, and monitor your child carefully during and after the injection so that any problems can be treated.

Nerve damage

A caudal block is similar to an epidural, so nerve damage such as numbness or weakness is possible but extremely rare.

How rare are these risks?

The serious risks from a caudal block, as listed above, are all extremely rare. In a national survey of over 18,000 caudal blocks performed in the UK, no child suffered permanent harm or death¹.

However, it is important for you to be aware of all the possibilities when thinking about what is best for your child. Your anaesthetist can discuss this with you in more detail, along with any alternatives, and help you to come to a decision.

When your child leaves hospital

As the caudal block wears off, your child will start to feel more discomfort from the operation. You should give them simple pain relief medicine. We will give you advice about this before you leave.

Remember to keep your child away from hot or sharp objects until the day after their operation.

Useful links

www.gosh.nhs.uk/medical-information/procedures-and-treatments/caudal-blocks

Contact us

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References

1. This statistic comes from 'Major complications of central neuraxial block: report on the Third National Audit Project of the Royal College of Anaesthetists' by Cook T, Counsell D, Wildsmith J, published 2009.

If you need a translation of this document, an interpreter or a version in large print, Braille or on audiotape, please telephone **023 8120 4688** for help.

www.uhs.nhs.uk/childrenshospital

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