



Intercostal Nerve Block

What is an intercostal nerve block?

An intercostal nerve block is a procedure done to help relieve pain in the chest wall, abdomen or back that can arise from surgical incisions, trauma to the chest, or other nerve pain in the chest such as what can occur with shingles. The nerves that supply sensation to your chest exit your spine and run along the underside of each rib, spanning from your back all the way to the middle of the chest on each side. Your pain management doctor can evaluate your symptoms and decide if this procedure may be right for you.

How is the procedure performed?

Generally, the procedure is performed in an outpatient surgery center using x-ray imaging, or fluoroscopy but can sometimes be performed under ultrasound. Your physician will have decided which intercostal nerves need to be blocked to relieve your pain. You will be lying on your stomach with blankets covering you while the area for the block is cleaned with an antiseptic. Using the x-ray, the ribs under which the nerves lie are visualized. Your physician will use a local anesthetic or numbing medication to numb the skin over each rib. Once your skin is numb, the physician will direct a small needle just next to each intercostal nerve and inject a steroid and local anesthetic. The procedure usually takes less than 10 minutes.

How effective is an intercostal nerve block?

Due to the numbing medication injected, sometimes several hours of pain relief can be obtained immediately after the procedure. While the numbing medication only lasts a few hours, the steroid takes anywhere from 2 days to 2 weeks to begin providing relief. It is the steroid which can provide long lasting relief. Sometimes the procedure provides long term relief but even if it only lasts a short time, the fact that it helped still provides your physician with diagnostic information he or she can use for future treatments.

What risks are involved with an intercostal nerve block?

An intercostal nerve block is a fairly low risk procedure and usually is followed by a day of mild soreness at the injection sites. However, there are always potential risks when placing a needle in the body. These include bleeding, allergic reaction, worsened pain, seizure or lung puncture but these are exceedingly rare.

What happens after an intercostal nerve block?

Do not drive or perform any vigorous activity for 12-24 hours after the procedure. You can return to normal activities the following day. You will be able to resume your normal diet and medications. Your physician will schedule your follow up appointment.

Is an intercostal nerve block right for me?

If you have chronic chest wall pain after a surgery, a trauma or from shingles, an intercostal nerve block may benefit you. Talk to your physician about your symptoms and he/she will help decide what is right for you.