

## Patient-controlled analgesia (PCA)



This booklet provides general information about patient-controlled pain relief. If you have any questions, please contact the **Pain Management Team**.

## **Pain after surgery**

Pain is usually 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 in your recovery.

## **How does PCA work?**

Patient-controlled analgesia (PCA) is a system that allows you to give yourself pain relief without having to ask a nurse for an injection. PCA consists of a machine next to your bed which is connected to your drip by means of a tube. The painkiller is stored inside the machine. There is a hand-held button to press when you feel pain. When it is pressed a small dose of a painkiller goes into your blood stream. This starts to work within minutes.

## **When should I use the PCA?**

You can use PCA in many different ways.

- Some patients wait until they have pain and press the button
- Some press the button a few minutes before they want to move
- Others will press regularly to keep the pain away
- 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 avoid this complication.

### **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
- feel light-headed
- feel dizzy
- have vivid dreams
- feel sick
- feel itchy
- feel constipated

None of these side-effects are serious or cause long term harm. If you are affected in any of these ways, do tell a nurse or a doctor. We can give you medicine to help sickness and itching. 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** using your weight as a guide but some patients may need a larger dose. If you are in pain, please do tell a nurse or a doctor.

### **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 change the type of painkiller in the PCA
- to stop the PCA and have regular tablets or suppositories for pain
- to have pain relief injections

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) will 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.

### **Further information**

Contact: The Pain Management Team  
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