Patient Controlled Analgesia (PCA)

Information for Patients and Carers

What is a PCA pump?

This is a pump which you control to give yourself a strong painkiller (analgesia). It is attached to your cannula, a small tube which goes straight into your vein, and works very quickly. It also means that you can give yourself a dose of painkiller when you need it and not have to wait for the nurse to give you an injection.

How safe is the PCA pump?

This pump is designed with many safety features. Your doctor will prescribe the pump to release a set amount. When you press the button you will get a measured amount of painkiller. The pump will then ‘lock-out’ for a short time, usually 5 minutes. Even if you press the button again no more painkiller can be given until the lock-out period has passed. This means that you cannot overdose. If the pump starts to bleep at any time do not get worried, the bleep is one of the safety features. The pump will automatically lock until your nurse has a look to see what is wrong. It may just be that the bag of painkiller needs replacing.

How often should I press the button?

You can press the button when you think you need a dose of the painkiller. However, the pump will only deliver a dose of painkiller if the button is pressed when the lock-out time has passed.

What if I'm still in pain?

Your nurse will ask you your pain score - is it mild, moderate or severe. You can then be given other types of painkiller as well as your PCA pump. These other drugs work differently in the body, and all of them are used together to help keep you more comfortable.
How long will I keep the PCA?

There is no set rule. As you get better you will find that you do not need so much strong painkiller from the pump and will use it less. The nurses and doctors will decide with you when it’s the best time to take it down.

What other form of painkillers can I choose?

You may decide that you do not want a PCA pump. Instead, when in severe pain, you can choose to have the same or a similar painkiller by an injection. This will give you a much larger dose in one go, rather than having the frequent small amount through the pump. Because of this you will have to wait a longer amount of time, usually 3 or 4 hours, before you can have another painkilling injection. Having a larger dose of painkiller this way may mean you will feel quite sleepy and occasionally may experience nausea.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of a PCA pump?

Advantages: You are in control of pressing the button and deciding when and how often you receive the strong painkiller. You are able to give yourself a regular small dose according to your pain level. This usually means that you do not feel too sleepy whilst taking the painkiller and we have found that our patient usually takes less of the drug in total. It may also mean that you will feel less sickness.

Disadvantages: When you fall asleep you will not be pressing the button. This may mean that you wake up feeling uncomfortable. If this is the case you will need to press the button often to get some pain relief. Remember that the pump locks out for 5 minutes between each press and delivery of the drug so it may take a little time to get comfortable again. Very occasionally you may need a larger top-up dose of painkiller if the regular small amount is not keeping your pain under control. The acute pain nurse or an anaesthetist will need to be contacted to do this.

If you have any more questions please ask your nurse.