

Having an eye operation under local anaesthetic

Your eye operation can be carried out using local anaesthesia (LA). This leaflet describes how local anaesthetics are used for eye operations and what happens when you come to theatre.

Please read this information carefully to understand why we recommend LA in preference to general anaesthesia (GA). After reading this leaflet you are not obliged to undergo treatment using LA. If you still have any questions after reading this information then please ask any member of staff, who will be happy to help you find answers to those questions.

What is a local anaesthetic?

Local anaesthetics numb sensations by blocking the normal messages that travel along our nerves – including the sensation of pain. Once you have been given the LA you should not be able to feel pain in your eyeball. You will normally stay awake and will probably still be able to feel being touched on the forehead, nose or eyelids. You are not expected to feel pain so please tell us if you experience any discomfort anywhere.

What are the advantages of local anaesthesia?

LA can be used for the majority of eye operations. It works very well, and provides pain relief immediately after the operation. It has fewer risks and avoids the adverse effects associated with a GA. This is because it does not normally affect any other part of your body, such as your heart or your breathing. When LA is used, you will not need to make changes to any of the prescribed medicines you might be taking.

If you are anxious, you can be offered an injection of a calming agent (a sedative drug) to enable you to feel relaxed but awake during the operation.

Preparation for local anaesthesia

In the anaesthetic room, before the LA we will monitor:

- Your heart, by attaching sticky patches to your chest (ECG).
- Your blood pressure, by placing a blood pressure cuff around your arm.
- The oxygen level in your blood – a clip (pulse oximeter) will be placed on your finger.

It is very rare for patients to become unwell or experience discomfort during eye surgery under LA. However, your anaesthetist may decide on some occasions, for safety purposes, to place a thin tube plastic tube (cannula) into a vein in the back of your hand or arm, so that any necessary additional drugs can be given promptly as an injection. Sedation can also be given through this cannula.

How is a local anaesthetic given?

The anaesthetist, eye surgeon or theatre practitioner will administer the LA. Eyedrops containing LA are often adequate for straightforward operations. An injection technique (Sub-Tenon's block) may be used for cases that are technically more difficult or involving the back of the eyeball. Eyedrops containing LA are used to first numb the sensitive surface of the eye before any injection. More information about this can be found in a leaflet called 'Sub-Tenon's block'.

As the LA takes effect, you may find it difficult to open that eye, and your eyesight is likely to be altered. You can decide whether to keep the other eye open or closed.

Will the local anaesthetic hurt?

This varies from person to person. There may be some minor discomfort or a stinging sensation associated with most eyedrops or the iodine antiseptic. Anaesthetic eyedrops containing proxymetacaine do not sting, so help to prevent discomfort caused by the iodine antiseptic, and also allow an opening in the surface tissue to be made prior to the injection of a Sub-Tenon's block.

What happens in theatre?

You will be made comfortable on the operating table and your head will be well supported. You may have a support placed under your knees to take the strain

off your back. A sterile sheet will be placed above your face to keep the area around the eye clean. It will not rest completely on your face. A tube will also be placed nearby to blow plenty of fresh air around your mouth and nose. This will help you breathe easily during the operation and feel comfortable. The heart and pulse monitors will be reattached. If you feel any discomfort during the operation, please let us know by speaking or by gently raising one hand, so that we can take appropriate action such as topping up your LA

You may request that a member of the theatre staff holds your hand during the operation.

Will I see anything?

This experience varies from patient to patient. It is not unusual to see coloured or white lights and movements during the operation, but the instruments are so close that you will not be able to see them clearly. In straightforward cases of cataract surgery, once the new lens is in place, you may notice an immediate improvement in vision. Do not worry if it takes time for vision to return and remember that a temporary eyeshield is usually placed over the eye that has been operated on.

How long does the anaesthetic last?

Between 2 to 4 hours. Double vision may sometimes occur, and may persist for longer (but not more than 12 hours).

Will I be in pain after the operation?

It is common to feel some discomfort when the anaesthetic wears off so a mild painkiller, such as paracetamol, may be required. It is a good idea to ensure you have some paracetamol or other mild painkiller that you know and trust, readily available at home.

Are there any complications of LA?

Eye surgery under LA is very safe. Sometimes, the tissues around the eye can swell after the injection of the local anaesthetic drug or, because of a small amount of bleeding following the injection, bruising on the eyelid may

occur. This type of swelling usually settles within a few days. If bleeding is severe following an injection, your operation may be postponed.

Redness of part of the white of the eye is to be expected after a Sub-Tenon's block, and as a consequence of surgery itself.

Serious complications are very rare

Although exceptionally rare, serious complications such as damage to the eye, blood vessels and eye muscles, or spread of local anaesthetic to the brain are known to happen (less than 1 case in 1000).

To avoid complications, we will not operate on your eye if your blood pressure is too high, or in the case of people with diabetes, if your blood sugar level is too high.

Contact information

Eye Day Unit: Royal Berkshire Hospital: 0118 322 7123

Prince Charles Eye Unit Eye Day Unit: 01753 636496

Out of hours: Dorrell Ward: 0118 322 7172

West Berkshire Community Hospital: 01635 273300

This document can be made available in other languages and formats upon request.

Eye Unit, Sept 2004

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