

Occipital Nerve Block

An occipital nerve block is used to treat headaches as well as pain in the neck and back of the head. This pain is caused by inflamed (swollen) or injured occipital nerves. The occipital nerves run from the top of the spine to the back of the head and around the ears. Common causes of swollen occipital nerves include injury, neck muscles that are very tight, and arthritis in your neck.

During the procedure, a mixture of a local anesthetic and a steroid are injected in the area around the nerves. The local anesthetic will numb the area. The steroid may help lower the swelling, which should reduce your pain.

Does the procedure hurt?

You may feel some discomfort, including stinging and pressure, when the medications are being injected.

What to expect

Blocks are given only when a patient has a headache. That way, we know if the block worked or not.

During the block:

- The skin over the top part of the back of your neck will be cleaned to prevent infection.
- Next, the doctor will inject the medication into the area.
- You will be awake during the procedure.
- The injection usually takes just a few minutes.

Possible side effects

Like all procedures, an occipital nerve block can have side effects, but these side effects are rare.

Possible side effects include:

- Tenderness, bruising or bleeding at the injection site
- Infection
- Dizziness
- Allergic reaction to the medication used

After the procedure

- Take over-the-counter pain medication, such as Tylenol (acetaminophen), ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin) or your prescribed pain medication.
- If you have any of the following symptoms, call the Spine Center:
 - Fever over 100° F
 - Chills
 - Problems at your injection site that last for more than 24 hours. These could include redness, swelling or bleeding.
 - Any new or unexplained symptoms
- The local anesthetic will wear off in 4 hours. At that time, your usual level of pain may return until the steroid starts working. This can take up to 2 weeks.

- Pain relief from an occipital nerve block usually will last for several months, but this may vary from patient to patient. You may have 3–4 of these injections a year.
- If you have no pain relief from the occipital nerve block, your doctor will work with you to find the source of your pain and explore your treatment options.

If you have any questions, please call the Pain Center at 617-754-5450 and ask to speak with a member of the clinical team.