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Study Says Nerve Blocks, Don't Reduce Pain, Improve Mood or Cut the Use of Analgesic Medic

In the Reuters Health News August 20, 2002 issue is a story reporting on a study that says nerve blocks do not do what they are supposed to do to reduce pain or improve the quality of life. According to Steven H. Sanders, program director in the psychology department at the Siskin Hospital for Physical Rehabilitation in Chattanooga, Tennessee, nerve blocks are often recommended for both acute and chronic low back pain, but long-term studies of the blocks are scarce. Dr. Sanders said, "We wanted to see whether (the blocks) made any difference."

To check the validity of this common procedure, Dr. Sanders and his group evaluated two groups: 30 patients with low back pain who received the blocks and 30 with low back pain who did not. The nerve blocks, more specifically called lumbar sympathetic nerve blocks, are injected into the area surrounding sympathetic nerves in the lower back. Most contain either local anesthetic or local anesthetic with corticosteroid drugs. To help assure that the results were accurate, both groups of patients had the same treatment except for the nerve blocks. The patients that got the nerve block had three to six blocks performed. The subjects in the block and non-block groups were matched as far as age, gender, duration of pain (which ranged from 2 to 4 years) and previous back surgery. The patients ranged in age from 43 to 56 years.

The results at the end of 6 months showed that the patients who received nerve blocks did no better than those who did not get nerve blocks in terms of pain, reduced use of pain medication, mood and other issues. The blocks did increase the treatment costs from an average of \$4,500 per patient in the group without nerve blocks to \$5,900 for the patients who got nerve blocks. In light of these results Dr. Sanders comments were that he felt these procedures represented, "a lot of expense, but no clinical benefits. You have to wonder why you do these (blocks)."