WHAT IS AN OCCIPITAL NERVE BLOCK?

An occipital nerve block is a type of interventional nerve block, which has become an important therapy in the treatment of certain types of acute and chronic pain, particularly where management with medication is unsuccessful. With nerve blocks, medication consisting of an anesthetic and a steroid is injected directly into a nerve to reduce inflammation and block the transmission of pain signals to the brain.

An occipital nerve block specifically blocks the occipital nerve, a carrier of pain signals from the head and neck to the brain.

WHAT CONDITIONS DO OCCIPITAL NERVE BLOCKS TREAT?

Occipital nerve blocks can be used in the treatment of occipital neuralgia and trigeminal autonomic cephalalgias, a group of related conditions causing headaches.

Occipital neuralgia is a condition which leads to headaches in the occipital region at the back of the head where the skull meets the neck. The cause of occipital neuralgia is uncertain, but it often develops spontaneously. They can also occur with whiplash injuries or other impacts to the back of the head. Headaches may occur intermittently throughout the week, and have been known to lead to nausea and vomiting. Because of the similarity of symptoms, occipital neuralgias are commonly confused with migraines.

Trigeminal autonomic cephalalgias are a group of headache disorders that tend to be severe and affect only one side of the head, while presenting with symptoms of the autonomic nervous system malfunction including sweating, tearing up and a runny nose on the affected side.

WHAT CAN I EXPECT DURING THIS PROCEDURE?

Of the nerve blocks, the occipital nerve block is one of the easiest and safest to perform. During the procedure, a neurologist or interventional pain specialist will feel for the protrusion of the occipital bone of the skull behind the ear, and identify the nearby occipital artery which runs alongside the greater occipital nerve. The physician can then inject an anesthetic/steroid solution into the area to provide pain relief and reduce inflammation. A lesser occipital nerve can also be targeted by injecting an area just below and to the outside of the greater occipital nerve.

WHEN WILL I BEGIN TO FEEL PAIN RELIEF AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

Local occipital nerve block is the treatment of choice for occipital neuralgias. In one study, an occipital nerve block provided headache relief for 90 percent of patients, lasting an average of 28 days. Despite the similarities between occipital neuralgias and the trigeminal autonomic cephalalgias, each of the two headache types differ in duration, frequency and response to therapy. However, each type of cephalalgia-type headache, especially when chronic and unresponsive to medication treatment, may benefit from an occipital nerve block.

Pain relief can be felt immediately for some patients, however, it should become apparent to all patients within 48 hours following the procedure.

WHAT IS THE ANTICIPATED RECOVERY FROM THE PROCEDURE?

Recovery from the procedure is short. You may have minor discomfort at the injection site, which usually resolves within 24 hours. If you continue to have symptoms, please refer to the discharge instructions. You may also call if there are any concerns.