

Rectus Sheath Catheters

What is a rectus sheath catheter?

A rectus sheath catheter is a fine tube that is inserted into the abdomen (tummy). It works by allowing pain-relieving medications to be injected close to the nerves that supply the middle of the abdomen, at the site of your operation wound. The medications have the effect of numbing the nerves meaning that the wound will not be as painful after the operation. In order to numb both sides of the scar, two catheters are usually inserted.

When are rectus sheath catheters used?

Rectus sheath catheters are most often used for operations where the surgeons need to make an opening in the abdomen. Common examples of operations include operations on the bowel, bladder and womb. Your anaesthetist will discuss with you whether the technique is appropriate for your operation.

How are rectus sheath catheters put in?

The catheters can be put in by either the anaesthetist or by the surgeon during your operation. You will be asleep when they are put in and so you will not feel or remember them being put in. They are secured in place with sticky dressings so that they do not fall out after the operation. They do not affect the operation itself in any way.

How are rectus sheath catheters used on the ward?

After the operation, the rectus sheath catheters are kept in place so that pain-relieving medication can be injected to the area where the nerves are. The medication that is used is a local anaesthetic which has the effect of numbing the nerves. However, the effect of the local anaesthetic does wear off and so the nursing staff on the ward will give you a 'top-up' every few hours.

Will I be given other pain relieving drugs?

The rectus sheath catheters cannot completely numb all the areas of the abdomen that have been operated on. Therefore, you are likely to need some additional pain relieving drugs, which can be given either as tablets or through your intravenous cannula ('drip'). One common way that these are given is with Patient Controlled Anaesthesia. There is a separate information booklet that explains how this works.

What is the benefit of having rectus sheath catheters?

The benefit of having rectus sheath catheters is that it can reduce the use of other pain relieving medications which all have side effects, such as making you sleepy. Because the rectus sheath catheters work on specific nerves they do not have these side effects.

Are there any risks with having rectus sheath catheters?

Like all anaesthetic techniques there are some risks with rectus sheath catheters. The most common problem is that they may not provide complete pain relief of the wound area and so you may need additional pain relieving medications.

Uncommon risks include bleeding and infection where the catheters enter the skin. There is also the possibility that the anaesthetic medication may enter the bloodstream and if this occurs you may feel strange and experience a tingling sensation around your lips and tongue. It is important that you tell the nursing staff if you experience these symptoms. These risks are all very rare and so it is difficult to know exactly how often they do occur. Overall, the technique is very safe.

How long do rectus sheath catheters stay in for?

The length of time the catheters stay in depends on the operation, how well they are working and how you are feeling after the operation. In most cases they stay in for at least two days after the operation and can stay in place for up to a week. After this time the operation wound is less painful and the catheters are removed to allow you to move more freely.

How are the rectus sheath catheters taken out?

Removal of the catheters is a simple procedure which is performed by the nursing staff on the ward. You do not need another general anaesthetic and their removal is normally painless.

Are there any alternatives to having rectus sheath catheters?

Yes. There are two main alternatives that you can discuss with your anaesthetist. Sometimes, an epidural catheter can be used. There are risks and benefits to this and there is a separate information booklet on this. The second option is to use painkillers taken as tablets or intravenously, using your intravenous drip.

Is there anything that I should look out for while the rectus sheath catheters are in?

You will be able to see the fine tube and the sticky dressings on the front of your abdomen. The dressings normally stay put but occasionally can peel away from the skin. If this happens it is important that you tell the nursing staff so that they can possibly re-apply the dressings. It is also important that you are careful not to pull the catheters out when moving around.

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