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## Occipital Nerve Block Patient Education

Southern Coast Specialists offers a variety of minimally invasive pain treatment procedures that we have perfected to help you achieve pain relief. Our treatments have been proven effective and are on the cutting edge of science related to pain reduction. Our goal is to improve every patient's overall function and thus restore a better quality of life.

### What is an Occipital Nerve Block?

Occipital nerve block is a therapeutic procedure used to treat pain originating at the back of the head. It is performed through injection of steroids and a local anesthetic into the base of the skull, where the occipital nerves are located. There are two greater and two lesser occipital nerves, one of each nerve on each side of the head. They emerge in the upper neck, from between bones of the spine, and supply sensation to the skin along the back of the scalp to the top of the head, reaching close to the forehead.

The greater occipital nerve is one of the most important nerves in transmitting touch, pain, or temperature sensations in the scalp to the brain and is frequently linked to migraines or chronic headaches that arise from the neck. In fact, many patients with chronic headache report that their pain arises from the base of the skull, often from one side, and spreads towards the top of the head, the temple, or the forehead. When there is irritation of the occipital nerve, pain may be felt near the eye of the same side of the head. Irritation or inflammation of the occipital nerves may also cause a specific type of pain called occipital neuralgia.

In an occipital nerve block, nerves are made numb with an injection of pain-relieving medication; this stops the flow of information, especially pain signals, from these nerves, leading to a decrease in chronic headaches. Occipital nerve blocks can also be used to reduce swelling and inflammation in the back of the head.

### What will happen during the procedure?

During an occipital nerve block, an injection using a very fine needle is done at the back of the head, just above the neck, in the region where the nerve crosses the skull. The skin is numbed before the injection is done. The needle is placed near the nerve and pain-relieving medication is injected. Most often, a combination of a long-acting local anesthetic and a steroid anti-inflammatory drug are injected.

### Can there be complications?

When an occipital nerve block is well performed, complications are very rare. Since these are sensory nerves, temporary numbness is experienced in the regions supplied by the nerves. There is an artery close to the occipital nerve and so there is a risk of seizure from injecting local anesthetic directly into the artery. This complication is exceedingly rare as aspiration prior to injection of the medication can help identify that a needle is in a blood vessel.

The procedure is not recommended to anyone who is allergic to the medication, who is on blood thinners, who has an active infection, uncontrolled diabetes or heart disease. Uncommon risks include bleeding (especially if on blood thinning medication), infection, pain, and nerve damage. The chance of side effects increases with additional occipital nerve block procedures. The needle does not cross the skull, so there is no risk of spinal fluid leakage, meningitis, or brain or spinal cord injury. The nerve does not connect to any muscles, so weakness or change in facial expression does not occur.



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### Things to Do Before the Procedure

- Any dietary restrictions will be discussed on the day the procedure appointment is booked.
- Take all your medications as scheduled on the day of the procedure, unless directed otherwise.
  - Think of any questions for us and write them down.
  - Make the nurses and physicians aware of any new changes in your medical condition.
- Before you come in, let us know if you are taking any blood thinners (e.g., aspirin, Coumadin, Plavix, Pletal) or anti-inflammatories.
  - Please remember to arrange for an adult to drive you home.

**If you have questions about this procedure, please see a Southern Coast Specialists representative.**

**If you are interested in learning more about our practice or treatment solutions, please visit [SCSpecialists.com](http://SCSpecialists.com).**