Patient Controlled Analgesia

Pain management method for short-term pain relief in children and teenagers during their stay in hospital.

Patient Controlled Analgesia (PCA) is used to help your child when moderate to severe pain is expected and they cannot take medicine by mouth while in hospital.

What is Patient Controlled Analgesia (PCA)?

Patient Controlled Analgesia or PCA is a form of pain relief controlled by the patient (your child). A PCA pump is a machine which allows your child to administer the analgesia (pain relief medicine) when they need it. The most common pain relief medicines used are morphine and fentanyl. The pain relief medicine in the PCA pump is delivered through a plastic tube into a vein (also called an intravenous drip or IV) when your child pushes a button.

The PCA is usually used for children aged seven years or older as they can understand the use of the button and are able to press it appropriately.

This is a safe technique because the PCA pump used to deliver the pain medicine is programmed according to your child’s weight. This lowers the risk of your child using too much of the pain relief medicine.

Your child is monitored and reviewed by the Acute Pain Service team every day to make sure the pain relief is working well enough and check for and treat any side effects.

How does a PCA work?

The PCA pump has a hand set with a button for your child to press when they have pain. When the button is pressed, the pain relief medicine is delivered in a set dose through the IV drip.

It is extremely important that ONLY your child presses the PCA button.

Sometimes the pump is set to give a small amount of medicine all the time as well as when the button is pressed.

If your child is sleeping well then they are probably getting enough pain relief.

It may be helpful to remind your child to press the button regularly during the fifteen minutes before activities such as dressing change, moving or physiotherapy to have the best effect.

If your child is uncomfortable, changes may be made to the PCA. The nurse/midwife can arrange this by talking with the Acute Pain Service team or anaesthetist.

Sometimes oxygen may be needed while using a PCA. It will be given by a mask on the face or through small tubes in the nose. The nurse/midwife will arrange this.

Why use a PCA?

The patient is often the best person to judge when and how much pain they have and how much pain medicine they need to make them feel better.

The good thing about having a PCA is that the pain medicine is available straight away.

By using the PCA, your child should be able to deep breathe, cough, move around in bed and get out of bed without too much discomfort.

Possible side effects of the pain relief medicine

Nausea (feeling sick) and vomiting may be caused by the medicines, but also from the operation, anaesthetic or other reasons. Medicines can be given to help this.

If itch is a problem, a change in medicine may help.

Please let your nurse/midwife know if your child is having any of these side effects.
What should I expect?
As your child recovers, the pain will become less and they will use their PCA less. The Acute Pain Service team will stop the PCA after a review and will prescribe another pain relief medicine that can be taken by mouth as a liquid or tablets.

The length of time on a PCA depends on your child, the surgery or their medical condition, but is usually about 1-5 days.

At home care
Your child may need to take pain relief medicine by mouth for the first few days until they are comfortably moving and sleeping well. If your child needs strong pain relief medicines when they go home, your ward doctor will order these and you will be given information by the hospital pharmacist about these medicines.

Key points to remember
- The PCA can only be pressed by the patient
- The PCA is safe
- Your child will be closely monitored
- Your child will have their pain assessed regularly
- The Acute Pain Service team will see your child every day

The Acute Pain Service
The Acute Pain Service helps to look after patients with all types of acute pain in the hospital. We will check your child at least daily while they are using a PCA.

More Information
If you have any other questions about PCA please ask your nurse or the Acute Pain Service.

Remember, you know your child best and we need you to help us do the best for them.

If at any time you are worried about your child’s comfort please tell your nurse or doctor.

For more information
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