

Expectations for Ulnar Neurolysis Surgery



Dr. Andrew M.I. Bogle

What is Ulnar Neuropathy at the Elbow?

Ulnar neuropathy at the elbow is caused when the ulnar nerve gets compressed as it passes through a canal (called the cubital tunnel) on the inside of the elbow. This pressure on the nerve can cause symptoms like numbness, tingling, or pain in the elbow, forearm, and ring and little fingers. There also can be symptoms of grip weakness or loss of coordination. Surgery to correct this problem is called ulnar neurolysis surgery.

Please refer to www.handcare.org for more information about ulnar neuropathy.

What to expect on the day of surgery

This procedure is done on an outpatient basis, so you will go home the same day.

Before the surgery, the anesthesia team will place a nerve block injecting numbing medication next to some of the nerves in your arm. This will numb and relax the muscles of your arm from the shoulder down for several hours. You will also have conscious sedation, which means you will sleep through the procedure. You will be breathing on your own, as intubation (inserting a tube into the throat) is not typically required for this surgery. You will not feel any pain during surgery, and it would be unusual for you to remember anything during surgery.

Your arm will remain numb for several hours, typically lasting around 12 hours from surgery.

What to Expect During Ulnar Neurolysis Surgery

Ulnar neurolysis surgery is a procedure designed to relieve pressure on the ulnar nerve to prevent the symptoms from getting worse and help improve the symptoms. The surgery itself usually takes less than 30 minutes, but patients spend several hours at the surgery center/hospital for surgical preparation and post-operative recovery time.

PROCEDURE

The incision is made on the inside of the elbow. The pressure on the nerve is relieved by releasing any points of compression on the nerve as it passes through the cubital tunnel.

- Most of the time after the pressure is released, the nerve is left in its normal path. However, occasionally the nerve slides out of the canal after the release, which requires the nerve to be repositioned (or transposed) into a new path to prevent the nerve from sliding in a painful way every time the elbow bends. This extra step is required approximately 10% of the time. If this step is required, this adds about 15 minutes to the procedure and requires the patient to be placed into a soft cast for 1 week after surgery. These patients usually need hand therapy and a protective splint for several weeks after surgery.
- Once the nerve is released, the incision will be closed with dissolvable sutures.

AFTERCARE

In most cases, your arm will be in a soft dressing from your upper arm to your hand. The dressing may be removed 3 days after surgery. After the initial dressing is removed, you may leave the incision uncovered if you keep it clean and dry, or you may use a Band-Aid to cover it.

- If a transposition is required, patients are placed in a soft cast that needs to remain in place until you return for our post op visit.

DRESSING

If you do not require a soft cast/splint, you may shower or bathe with the incision uncovered 3 days post-surgery, however you cannot scrub the incision or soak it in the bath or pool until you come back for follow up.

RECOVERY AND FOLLOW-UP

Most of the painful symptoms are typically relieved quickly after surgery. However, numbness and tingling may take up to a year and a half to reach maximal improvement and some may persist even after 1.5 years. Similarly, any loss of strength and coordination may take up to 1.5 years after surgery to reach maximal improvement. In some patients who have nerve damage prior to surgery, the symptoms may persist permanently.

If you have any questions, the most efficient way to contact us is via the messaging portal on MyChart. Dr. Bogle's team works on checking and answering these messages throughout the workday to get back with you as quickly as possible. **After hours and on weekends** (outside of 8 a.m. – 5 p.m. Monday-Friday) please call 804-379-2414 to speak with the on-call provider.



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15300 EAST WEST ROAD
MIDLOTHIAN, VA 23114
P 804.939.6637 | F 804.346.2106
ORTHOVIRGINIA.COM