UW Medicine
HARBORVIEW
MEDICAL CENTER

Intravenous Patient Controlled Analgesia (IV PCA)
Pain control for patients

You have intravenous patient controlled analgesia (IV PCA) to help manage your pain. This handout tells how to use PCA. Your nurse will go over this with you. If you have questions about pain control, please ask.

What is patient controlled analgesia?

Analgesia is the medical term for pain relief. *Patient controlled analgesia* (PCA) is a system that allows you to give yourself a dose of pain medicine instead of needing to call a nurse. We use PCA because:

- Each person's need for pain medicine is different

- You are the best judge of your pain level and when you need relief

With *intravenous* (IV) PCA, pain medicine goes directly into your vein.

How does IV PCA work?

The PCA system has 2 parts:

- A **pump** that is kept next to your bed.

- A **hand-held control** that connects to the pump by a cable. The control has a button that you push when you need a dose of pain medicine. This control is kept at your side while you are using PCA.

Your nurse will set the PCA so that it gives the exact dose that your doctor prescribed. When you press the control button, the right amount of medicine will move through the tubing and into your IV tube.

A PCA hand-held control

How do I give myself a dose of pain medicine with the PCA?

To give yourself a dose of pain medicine, press the PCA control button. For about 6 to 10 minutes after you receive a dose, the pump will not give you another dose, even if you press the button again. This gives the medicine time to work. The button will light up when it is OK to have another dose.

If you still have pain after a short wait, press the button again. Most patients press the button several times each hour to control their pain.

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Why should I use PCA?

- PCA allows you to take the pain medicine when you feel you need it. You get it right away, because you do not need to call your nurse.

- Since the medicine goes into your IV, it can work quickly.

- PCA allows you to get smaller doses of pain medicine more often.

When should I push the PCA button?

Push the PCA button:

- When your pain is getting worse

- A few minutes before you do an activity that can cause pain, such as turning, walking, or your coughing and deep breathing exercises.

Give yourself enough medicine so that you are comfortable. The medicine will not make you pain-free, but it should allow you to rest and move.

What if my pain is not well controlled with PCA?

We want to help you control your pain so that you can do the activities that will help you recover. But, you will have some pain and discomfort while you heal. Realistic goals for pain control are to prevent severe pain and keep pain at a lower level. Most people have mild to moderate pain with activity while they are recovering.

Your nurse will check with you to make sure you are comfortable, and that you are using the pump as you should. Your nurse may be able to give you an extra dose, but you should not need this extra dose very often.

Please tell your doctor or nurse if you feel you cannot control your pain. The amount or timing of medicine you receive may be changed to give you better pain control. But, medicine alone does not control pain. Talk to your nurse or doctor about other things you can do to control your pain.

For Your Safety

It is important that **only** you, the patient, press the PCA button. Family members and friends should never press the button for you.

Tell your nurse **right away** if you are:

- Feeling too sleepy from the pain medicine

- Having trouble breathing

When is it time to stop PCA?

You will no longer need PCA when your healthcare team feels you are ready to take pills by mouth and that your pain can be controlled with pills. Pills can work better than IV PCA because the pain control lasts several hours.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your nurse if you have questions or concerns.

Weekdays from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., call your clinic:

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After hours and on weekends and holidays, call the Community Care Line nurse: 206.744.2500.

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