Can PCA cause addiction?
➤ Pain medications are not addictive when the medication is prescribed for a short time and then stopped gradually.
➤ People who take medicine to relieve physical pain are not likely to become addicted to medicine.
➤ Research studies have shown that patients who utilise the PCA pump actually use less pain medication.
➤ As your condition improves and your pain lessen, your doctor will change your pain medications to be taken by mouth.

What are the potential side effects of PCA medications?
Your pain medication may cause some side effects.
➤ Please tell your nurse if you experience any nausea, constipation, itching, hives, difficulty urinating, mental confusion, or excessive sleepiness.

There are treatments available to decrease the side effects.

Patient Controlled Analgesia (PCA)

Many patients are worried about using some medicines as painkillers e.g. morphine.
➤ Painkillers are very good at relieving pain after an operation.
➤ They are safe. You cannot become addicted to them.

➤ When you use a lot of morphine you fall asleep. While you sleep you will not press the button. You will wake up when the morphine has worn off - so you cannot overdose.

As with all drugs, morphine can produce unwanted effects. We cannot predict who will be effected. Morphine can make some people feel tired, light-headed, dizzy and it can even produce vivid dreams. It can make you feel sick, itchy and constipated.

If you are affected in any of these ways, tell a doctor or nurse.
➤ Medicine can be used to help sickness and itching.
➤ Milder painkillers can be given, either by mouth or by suppository, at the same time as morphine. This will reduce the amount of morphine you need and lessen the unwanted effects.
➤ If you are unhappy using PCA, alternatives are available.

Occasionally, some patients still have pain despite making full use of PCA. Remember the PCA machine is set up to be safe for everyone. But some patients will need larger doses.

If you are in pain, please tell the ward staff.
➤ A doctor or nurse from the Pain Team will come to see you. These people are experts in controlling pain.
➤ They will visit you while you are using PCA.
➤ As you recover they will give you tablets for pain and then discuss when to stop PCA.


This leaflet was prepared by HSE Mid-Western Regional Hospital, Acute Pain Committee.
What is a PCA and why is it important?

Pain is a personal matter. The amount and type of pain relief required varies between people, even for the same type of injury or surgery.

- The Patient Controlled Analgesia pump (PCA) is a special computerised infusion pump that holds pain medication and delivers it through an intravenous line (IV) which is a special line for delivering medication through a vein.
- The pump enables you to give yourself pain medication and to control the amount of medication you receive for pain relief.
- Pain control helps the natural healing process, decreases anxiety, and allows for easier movement.

How does it work?

You are the key to managing your pain with the PCA pump because only you know how you really feel.

- The PCA allows you to adjust your medication to provide a level of comfort that is right for you.
- Your doctor and nurse will work closely with you. They will depend on you to describe your pain in four ways:
  - What hurts?
  - Where does it hurt?
  - How much does it hurt?
  - Does it hurt?

You will be asked to rate your pain on a scale from 0 (no pain) to 10 (the worst pain you can imagine). Your responses will help to guide the doctor and the nurse in setting the dosage of pain medication to meet your needs.

- The PCA may not always provide complete pain relief. It is important to notify your nurse if you are uncomfortable so that additional pain relief measures can be provided.
- The nurse will teach you how to use the pump properly. When you feel pain, you should press and release the control button to deliver a small amount of pain killer which is delivered directly into your blood stream. Pain relief should be felt within a few minutes, if not press the button again. The pump will “beep” to show you that you have received the dose of medication.
- It is important that only you control the medication, and not family members or visitors. No one should press the button except you.
- After each dose, the pump is set to wait six minutes before another dose can be given. This protects you from receiving too much medication.
- The button should only be pressed when you experience pain.

Is it possible to get an overdose of medication?

- The PCA pump is programmed so that you cannot give yourself too much medication.
- The nurse will set the pump’s controls to deliver pain medication at the level or dose prescribed by your doctor.

It is important that only the patient presses the button. In rare instances respiratory depression has occurred from family members pressing the button while patients are sleeping.

Do not let family members press the button.

How do I get pain relief?

Use the PCA pump to keep your pain at a level you can tolerate and to maintain your comfort level goal.

- Do not wait too long to give yourself the pain medication. This may make your pain rise to an unbearable level and it may be more difficult to return to a comfortable state.
- You should not let fear or concerns over this method of pain control keep you from using your pain medication.
- The best way to get the pain control that is right for you is through talking openly and honestly with your doctor and nurse about any questions or concerns you may have.