Anesthesia for Arm Surgery

There are several tools that your Anesthesiologist may use in preventing pain before, during, and after your planned surgical procedure. The type of anesthesia used depends on the nature, location, and duration of the surgery, your overall level of health, and your preference after discussion with both your surgeon and your anesthesiologist.

“Local anesthesia”
Dulling or preventing sensation just within the area that your surgeon will be cutting, drilling, or pinning. This is done by injecting numbing medication into the area of interest. This may be done with or without sedative medications. Typically, Dr. Trueblood recommends the placement of an intravenous line (i.v.) for deep, temporary sedation while the injections are performed. Once you have been “numbed up”, further sedative medications may be given by the anesthesiologist to help you relax during surgery if you need them. This approach maximizes your comfort while minimizing the risks of nausea, dizziness, and drowsiness sometimes seen with general anesthesia.

“General anesthesia”
General anesthesia is when you are put to sleep and kept there by inhaling sedating gas through a tube placed in your windpipe. This is a tried and true technique and is often used in combination with other techniques for longer or more involved surgeries. There are risks associated with inhaled anesthesia which, while very, very rare may be serious. Please feel free to discuss this with your Anesthesiologist.

“Regional Anesthesia”
Regional anesthesia temporarily blocks the function of the nerves that provide sensation to a part of your body. This is usually performed by providing a single injection of numbing medication through a needle to the area around a major nerve or group of nerves. Common sites for this would be in the neck (Interscalene block) which is usually used for shoulder and upper arm surgery or into the area of your armpit (axillary or subcoracoid blocks) for elbow, forearm, wrist, and hand surgery.

Why Choose Regional Anesthesia
The addition of regional anesthesia has been shown to provide better postoperative pain relief, decrease the risk of postoperative nausea and vomiting, and helps to minimize the use of sedating medications during surgery that can slow your initial recovery after surgery.
Will Regional Anesthesia Hurt?
The injection of numbing medication through a needle can be slightly uncomfortable. Sometimes, the anesthesiologist may use a special device that stimulates the nerves that are to be numbed and which helps them in precisely locating these nerves. This causes the muscles in your arm or hand to twitch and move which may feel strange but is not painful but may feel strange. For this reason, your anesthesiologist will offer sedating medications during the procedure to help you relax and feel comfortable.

How Long Will My “Block” Last
Placing the block usually takes 5-15 minutes and the numbness will come on over 10 to 30 minutes. The medications used may then last from 12 to 24 hours. Dr. Trueblood has noticed that this tends to occur at 4 in the morning, regardless of what time you had surgery, so he encourages you to keep your pain medication and a glass of water next to where you will be sleeping after surgery.

Will I Be Awake During Surgery?
Having surgery under regional anesthesia means that the part of your body to be operated upon will be numb during surgery. Some patients prefer to be awake during surgery. Most prefer to be asleep. Often a general anesthetic is recommended in addition to regional anesthesia and the purpose of the regional “block” is to minimize the need for sedating medications and optimize your postoperative comfort. Your anesthesiologist will discuss this with you at the time of your surgery. Under all circumstances, you will not be able to see the surgery itself because of the large, sterile plastic and paper-cloth barriers used to protect the area of your surgery from contamination.

Do I Have To Have a Regional Block?
No. This is a technique used because of the advantages it offers for your comfort and recovery. It is, however, always an optional service for you. Occasionally, there may be medical reasons such as severe heart or lung disease that will lead your anesthesiologist to advise you toward a regional anesthetic. If this is the case, your anesthesiologist will discuss it with you.

Are There Complications With Anesthesia?
With any medication, there are risks and benefits. For regional anesthesia, there may be incomplete pain relief, soreness or bruising at the injection site, or even tingling that lasts for several days. These are rare and tend to resolve completely. Much less likely are serious complications such as significant bleeding, infection, or nerve injury. Serious complications may also occur with the use of sedating or general anesthetic medications such as pneumonia, heart problems, and strokes. Your anesthesiologist will be happy to discuss any and all of your questions with you.