



## About the epidural procedure

- Epidurals are a very common method of pain relief during labour. Approximately 60-70% of labouring women get epidurals annually.
- Once it is determined by your doctor /mid-wife that your labour is progressing, you have the option to request an epidural for pain relief.
- Epidurals are usually placed during the first stage of labour when you are having regular contractions.
- Epidurals are usually placed while you are in a sitting position, or you may be lying on your side.
- Epidurals for labour are placed in your lower back, known as your lumbar spine.
- Local anaesthetic, or numbing medication, will be placed prior to insertion of the epidural to reduce the pain.
- It is common to feel a little pressure in your back while the epidural is being placed.
- An epidural catheter is then inserted. Its diameter is about the size of a piece of angel hair pasta.
- Once the epidural is in place, you will receive medications through the catheter which should help alleviate your labour pain.

## Will I still feel pain after the epidural?

- An epidural may take anywhere from 5-15 minutes to start working after insertion.
- With an epidural, you should expect significant pain relief, but not complete pain relief.
- You should expect to feel some pressure as the baby moves through the birth canal, and **this helps you know when to "push"**.

## What are the side effects of getting an epidural?

- Common side effects include mild itching, difficulty passing urine, no feeling in your lower tummy and legs, and inability to move your legs until the medication wears off (usually up to 8 hours).
- Other side effects include nausea and mild back pain after delivery.
- You may not be able to get an epidural if you have a bleeding or clotting disorder, current infection, very low blood pressure, are too close to delivery or are unable to cooperate.

# Epidurals for Labour

## Frequently Asked Questions



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### **What are the alternatives to an epidural for pain control during labour?**

Alternative pain control options include intravenous pain medications and learned relaxation techniques. Although some women find these alternatives helpful, these options are less effective and do not relieve pain to the same extent as an epidural.

### **What are the risks of an epidural?**

In general, epidural analgesia is very safe, but not without risks. Risks include hypotension or low blood pressure (10-20%), infection (<0.01%), bleeding (<1%), puncture in spinal cord ("wet tap" or Dural puncture) (1%), headache (<1%), allergic reaction (<1%), failed block, and intravascular injection (1%). You and your baby are closely monitored during and after epidural placement. If they occur, most adverse events are recognised immediately and safely treated.

### **What are the benefits of an epidural?**

The intense pain and stress of labour may decrease oxygen transfer and blood flow to your baby. Adequate pain control during labour can reverse these effects. The epidural can also be used if a vacuum (or forceps) delivery or C-section is eventually required.

### **If I decline an epidural at first, can I change my mind during the course of labour?**

You may request an epidural at any time during your labour. However, it is important to remember that it may take up to 15 minutes to experience pain relief from an epidural. In late first stage of labour when women have more intense pain, a spinal or combined spinal-epidural (CSE) technique may be performed. With these techniques, the onset of pain relief is much faster (usually 5 minutes) because the medication is deposited directly into the cerebrospinal fluid (CSF). If you are unable to remain still because of intense labour pain, your physician may not be able to perform any of these techniques.

### **Who cannot receive an epidural?**

Patients with a skin infection where we need to place the needle, history of bleeding disorders, certain brain or spine disorders, or certain back surgeries. You also cannot get an epidural if you cannot cooperate with the procedure.

### **Can an epidural slow down the progression of my labour?**

There has been no conclusive evidence to show that epidurals slow down the progression of labour or increase the frequency of caesarean delivery.

### **How does an epidural work if I need to have a C- section?**

You can use the same epidural catheter if you need to have surgery for any reason. The catheter will be dosed with a stronger medicine that will take away the pain associated with surgery and allow you to be awake for the birth of your baby. You will still feel pressure, touch and pulling but no sharp pain associated with surgery.

### **Does it hurt?**

The anaesthesiologist will use a small needle to numb the area of your back where the epidural will be administered. This medicine may sting for 5-10 seconds. You will feel pushing and pressure when the epidural is being placed, but it should not be painful.