

Epidural in Childbirth

Patient information sheet

Why do I need information on epidurals when I want natural childbirth?

Even if you are not planning to have an epidural, it is still very important to understand the following information. Unplanned situations may arise and an epidural, spinal or general anesthetic may be needed.

What is an epidural?

An epidural is a method of reducing pain given by an Anesthesiologist (a doctor specialized in pain relief). The procedure, to reduce pain and relax the muscles from waist down, involves injecting a local anesthetic between the bones of your spine, in the space around the spinal cord. Rarely, due to various reasons, epidural may relieve the pain partially or not at all. Other management may be necessary in those circumstances.

How is an epidural given?

Before an epidural can be given, blood results must be obtained (which should be within normal limits) and an intravenous started to maintain your blood pressure. You will be requested to sit up or curl up on your side, and lie still. The skin over your lower back is washed with antiseptic solution, then frozen with a needle with local anesthetic. Once the epidural needle is in the epidural space, the epidural catheter (a fine plastic tube) is passed through and the needle removed. Local anesthetic is then given through this catheter by an infusion pump. Pain relief begins in five to ten minutes, taking full effect in 15 to 20 minutes.

How long will the pain relief last?

To keep you comfortable, small amounts of local anesthetic are infused continually into the tube in your back by an infusion pump, until you have delivered your baby. The epidural does not always relieve the pressure you may feel just before delivery as the baby moves down the birth canal. This feeling of pressure will help you push more effectively.

When would an epidural be used?

Epidurals can be used for: Difficulty in coping with the pain of childbirth, to provide relief and rest in a prolonged labour, forceps delivery or caesarean sections.

What are the benefits of an epidural?

An epidural provides pain relief without affecting the baby and it can also speed up the labour by helping you to relax.

Will I be able to move after having an epidural?

You will be able to move your upper body and legs and turn from side to side. If an epidural is needed over many hours, your legs may become increasingly numb. It is necessary to stay in bed while the epidural is working and after birth until the numbness is gone from your legs approximately one to three hours. A urinary catheter is also placed to keep the bladder empty.

Who decides if I need an epidural?

In most cases, you decide. Your caregivers may recommend it in various situations. An Anesthesiologist will give the epidural.

How will the epidural affect my baby?

An epidural is a recommended method of pain control and will not harm your baby.

Will I get an epidural if I want one?

Not necessarily. Blood clotting abnormalities and some other conditions may be a contraindication for epidural. Also if you are very overweight, it may make it too difficult to insert an epidural. If the Anesthesiologist is involved in the care of another patient this may cause a delay in getting an epidural. Your Obstetrician or Midwife will continue to provide the pain relief until the Anesthesiologist can attend.

What risks are involved?

Serious or long-term complications are very rare but may occur, such as, paralysis of the legs, infection, bleeding, retained epidural catheter, respiratory and cardiac arrest, brain damage and death. Every precaution is taken to reduce these risks.

Minor complications like headache may occur in less than 2% of cases and occasionally may need epidural blood patch. Backache occur just as frequently after birth whether an epidural has been given or not.

A final word....

It is important that you know about epidurals before your labour begins so you are prepared to make an informed decision. It is not easy to discuss epidurals when you are in very active labour. Usually the choice to have an epidural can only be made when you experience labour and decide whether you require pain relief.

If you would like more information on epidurals, speak with your prenatal teacher, obstetrician, midwife, nurse or ask to see the anesthesiologist. We hope to make your childbirth experience at Cambridge Memorial Hospital a positive one. Every precaution will be taken for your safety and comfort.