



# EPIDURAL INFORMATION

## What is an epidural for labour?

- It is a form pain relief to make your labour less painful.
- A small plastic tube, called an epidural catheter, is inserted between the bones of your spine into the epidural space.
- Pain relieving drugs are given through the catheter block pain nerves in the spine and to provide pain relief until the baby is born.
- An epidural provides the most effective pain relief for labour and birth.

## What are the advantages of epidural pain relief?

- If the birth of your baby needs forceps or emergency caesarean section the epidural can often be used and the procedure can start sooner.
- If you already have an epidural inserted, it usually means that you won't need to have a general anaesthetic during a caesarean and can be awake for the birth of your baby.

Research shows that epidurals:

- do not directly affect your baby
- do not increase your chance of needing an emergency caesarean delivery

## How is the epidural catheter put in?

The epidural is put in by an anaesthetist and insertion takes about 20 minutes.

- You will need a fluid drip in your hand or arm.
- You will be positioned either lying on your side or sitting up.
- Your back will be cleaned with cold antiseptic solution
- Local anaesthetic will be injected to numb the skin on your back.
- You may feel a pushing sensation in your back while the epidural is inserted. **While this is done you should stay as still as possible to reduce the chance of any damage to the nerves in your spine.**
- You may feel a sensation like an electric tingle in your back or down your legs when the epidural catheter is inserted. This is not dangerous.
- After the needle is removed from your back, the epidural catheter will be securely taped on your skin.
- Once the anaesthetic drugs are given down the tube, it takes about 20 minutes to provide effect.

## How does an epidural affect you?

- Your legs may feel heavy so you will need to stay in bed.
- You will need a urinary catheter as epidurals can reduce the feeling of a full bladder.
- You may feel shivery, itchy or warm.
- An epidural can sometimes prolong your labour or increase the need to use forceps to help your baby's birth.
- An epidural can cause changes in your baby's heart rate.

## What are the risks?

Further epidural pain relief through the catheter	Common – 1 in 8
Fall in blood pressure (which is easily treated)	Common – 1 in 20
Severe headache	Uncommon – 1 in 100
Temporary nerve damage	Very rare – less than 1 in 13,000
Epidural infection/ meningitis	Very rare – 1 in 50,000
Very high epidural block	Very rare – 1 in 100,000
Epidural blood clot	Very rare – 1 in 170,000
Severe injury / paralysis	Extremely rare – 1 in 250,000

## Questions or concerns

Talk to your obstetrician or midwife, who can arrange for you to speak with an anaesthetist.



Interpreter

You have a right to an interpreter. Ask the staff caring for you to contact Language Services and arrange for an interpreter to help you.

## Acute Pain Service

T: (03) 8345 2389

*All information contained is current at the time of writing.*

## References

- *Pain relief during childbirth*, The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, Australian Society of Anaesthetists, Edition 1, 14 Dec 2006.
- *Pain relief in Labour*, Obstetric Anaesthetists' Association, 3rd Edition, January 2008.
- Chung SA, Palmer GM, Scott DA, Halliwell R, Trina J (editors); *Acute Pain Management: Scientific Evidence*, 4th edition, ANZCA & FPM, Melbourne.