

Information About Labor Epidurals: Your Questions Answered

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Background

The decision to get an epidural is your choice and you are free to change your mind at any point during labor.

What is a labor epidural?

A labor epidural involves placing a very thin plastic tube, known as an “epidural catheter” in a woman's lower back under sterile conditions. Numbing medicine is given first with a very small needle and it is normal to feel pressure in the back during placement.

How long does it take to get pain relief?

Once placed, it can take from 5-20 minutes to get good pain relief. It is possible to adjust the dose as needed throughout your labor.

How long does the pain relief last?

Pain medication can continue to be given for as long as you need it—usually until shortly after delivery.

What are the benefits of getting an epidural?

Epidural pain relief is the most effective type of pain relief available for labor – it avoids suffering from pain and helps the mother have a positive birth experience. Over 60% of women in the United States receive an epidural for childbirth.

Very weak concentrations of numbing medications and opioid pain medications are usually used for labor, so only a tiny amount gets into the mother's blood stream. This means that unlike many other types of pain relief like IV medications and inhaled drugs, it does not cause drowsiness, and is safe for the baby. It is also safe to breastfeed your baby.

It allows easier, and potentially safer anesthesia for a cesarean delivery since additional stronger numbing medications can be given through the catheter in the back. This avoids the need for a new spinal injection or general anesthesia (going fully to sleep and needing a breathing tube).

What are the risks?

Epidurals are safe. Serious risks are very rare and include blood clot or infection in the spine and nerve damage (ranging from 1 in 50,000 to 1 in a million). Less serious risks include a bad headache (1 in 100-500), failed pain relief needing replacement of the catheter (1 in 10 – 50) and complications from the catheter being in the wrong location (rare). Getting an epidural will not slow down your labor noticeably or increase your chance of needing cesarean delivery.

What are the side effects?

Possible side effects are a drop in your blood pressure, itching, fever, heaviness in the legs, and soreness in the back for a few days. Long lasting back pain is NOT caused by epidurals but is common after any pregnancy.



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