

ABOUT EPIDURALS FOR PAIN: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

An epidural is the most common pain medicine used during labor.

How and when can I get an epidural for pain during labor?

When you choose to have an epidural, a doctor places a tiny needle and tube (catheter) into your lower back. The needle is removed and the catheter left in place to provide medicine as needed. You can start an epidural any time during your labor – in the beginning, middle, or even toward the end. Just ask your doctor or midwife.

What does an epidural do?

An epidural gives you pain medicine that makes part of your body numb - from your bellybutton to your upper legs. This lets you stay awake during your labor, and lets you feel pressure. This means you can still push when it's time to give birth to your baby. It takes about 15 minutes for the medicine to work.

Does it hurt?

A doctor will numb the area before they place the epidural. It may sting or burn for a moment and then most patients feel some pressure as the needle goes in.

How long does the pain relief last?

You can continue to get pain medicine through an epidural for as long as you need it. The amount of medicine can be increased or decreased, depending on your pain.

Can an epidural make labor go slower, or lead to a cesarean delivery (C-section)?

There is no evidence that it does either. A C-section is usually caused by other factors, like the size or position of the baby or slow labor due to other issues. There is some evidence that epidurals can make the first stage of labor go quicker by allowing moms to relax.

Can an epidural hurt my baby?

The amount of medication that reaches the baby from the epidural is very small. There is no evidence that it causes any harm.

Are there risks or side effects?

Epidurals are very safe; serious complications are extremely rare. However, as with all medicines and medical procedures, there are potential side effects:

Decrease in blood pressure – The medicine may lower your blood pressure, which can slow your baby's heart rate. To prevent this we will give extra fluids through your IV. Your doctor may also give you medicine to maintain your blood pressure.

Sore back – Your lower back may be sore where the doctor put in the needle. This may last a few days. There is no evidence that epidurals cause permanent back pain.

Headache – On rare occasions, the needle pierces the covering of the spinal cord. This can cause a headache that may last for a few days if untreated. If this happens, please talk to your doctor about treatment options.