

Epidural Analgesia for Labor Pain



What is epidural analgesia?

Epidural analgesia is one of many options that can be used to help you cope with labor pain. Epidural analgesia for labor pain helps you feel less pain in your body from the waist down. The epidural space is a small area in your back around the nerves in your spinal cord. The nerves send messages from your upper and lower body through the spine and up to your brain. Analgesia means pain relief.

How does epidural analgesia work for labor pain?

When you get an epidural, a small amount of an anesthetic medicine (numbing drug) is placed in the epidural space in your back. The anesthetic blocks the messages from nerves that come from your pelvis and legs to your brain. When pain messages do not get to your brain, you do not feel labor pain or you feel less pain.

How is an epidural done?

A specially trained doctor or nurse places a very thin tube, called a catheter, into the epidural space through a needle. You sit on the side of the bed or curl up on your side. The nurse or doctor then gives you a small shot of anesthetic in your back so you do not feel pain from the needle with the catheter. Then the needle is pushed through the area of your back that is numbed into the epidural space. When the needle reaches the epidural space, the thin tube is pushed through the needle, and the needle is removed. The anesthetic keeps going through the thin tube into the epidural space for the rest of your labor.

What will I feel when the epidural is working?

While the anesthetic is going into the epidural space, you will feel less or no labor pain. You can feel pressure if someone touches you. You may feel pressure in your abdomen or in your pelvis when you have contractions. You may not be able to feel when you have to urinate. The anesthetic can also keep you from being able to move your legs because it blocks the nerve messages from your brain that tell your legs to move. After you have your baby, the epidural catheter is taken out. The numbness will go away quickly. You will be able to move your legs and walk in a few hours.

How well does epidural analgesia work?

Most women who have epidural analgesia during labor are so comfortable they can talk, watch television, or even sleep. Sometimes, the epidural does not work well on some nerves, and you will feel pain in a small area of your abdomen, pelvis, or upper leg. There is no way to know ahead of time who will feel no labor pain with an epidural and who will still have some pain.

Do epidurals make labor last longer?

When epidurals were first used, it was thought that they could make labor longer and increase the chance of cesarean birth. Epidurals today use much lighter doses of the anesthetic. Studies have not found that epidurals change the total amount of time you are in labor.



What are the benefits of epidural analgesia?

- Epidural analgesia takes labor pain away better than other medications used for labor pain.
- If your labor is long, an epidural can give you a chance to rest so that you can gather your strength before pushing your baby out.
- If you need a cesarean, your epidural can be used to make you numb for the surgery.
- Women with twins or babies in a breech position who want to have a vaginal birth may use an epidural so they are ready for a cesarean if there are problems during labor or birth.

What are the risks from the epidural needle, catheter, and anesthetic?

When a needle is put near the spinal cord, there is a very small chance of these problems:

- Infection at the site where the needle is put in your back.
- The needle could hit a nerve and cause nerve damage or paralysis (not being able to move).
- If the epidural is placed too high in your back or into spinal fluid, you could lose the feeling of breathing and might need help to breathe for a short time.

What are the risks of having an epidural during labor?

- You may not be able to feel when you need to urinate. You may need to have a catheter put into your urethra (opening for urine) to let your urine come out.
- Women who have an epidural have a higher chance of getting a fever during labor and being given antibiotics.
- Women who have an epidural are more likely to need the medication Pitocin to make their contractions stronger.
- It can be hard to feel your contractions when you need to push so the pushing stage can be longer for women with an epidural.
- Women who have an epidural may have a higher chance of needing a vacuum or forceps to help them push their baby out.

American Society of Anesthesiologists

<https://www.asahq.org/whensecondscount/pain-management/techniques/epidural/>

Cleveland Clinic

<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/4450-pregnancy-epidurals-pain-relief-options-during-delivery>

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