



Epidural pain relief for labour

What is an epidural?

An epidural is a type of pain relief that makes labour less painful.

A doctor inserts a small plastic tube, called an epidural catheter, into the area near your spinal cord (the epidural space). Pain-relieving medicines are given through the catheter to block the pain nerves in your spine. This can provide pain relief until your baby is born.

An epidural is the most effective way to relieve pain during labour and birth.

What are the benefits of an epidural?

If your baby needs to be born using forceps or by emergency caesarean, an epidural can help the procedure start sooner.

Having an epidural already in place usually means that you won't need a general anaesthetic during a caesarean, so you can be awake for your baby's birth.

Research shows that epidurals don't directly affect your baby or increase your chance of needing an emergency caesarean.

How is the epidural catheter put in?

An anaesthetist will insert your epidural. This takes about 20 minutes.

- A drip will be put in your hand or arm to give you fluids.
- You will lie on your side or sit up for the procedure.
- Your back will be cleaned with a cold antiseptic solution
- A local anaesthetic will be injected to numb the skin on your back.

- You may feel pressure on your back while the epidural is inserted. Staying still will help the procedure go more smoothly and reduce the chance of side effects.
- You might feel a tingling sensation in your back or down your legs when the epidural catheter is inserted. This is not dangerous.
- After the needle is removed, the epidural catheter will be taped securely to your skin.
- The anaesthetic medicines will flow through the catheter and take about 10 to 20 minutes to work.

How does an epidural affect you?

An epidural may make your legs feel heavy, so you'll need to stay in bed.

It may also make it hard to feel when your bladder is full, so you'll need a urinary catheter.

You may feel shivery, itchy, or warm.

An epidural can sometimes prolong your labour or increase the need for forceps to help with your baby's birth.

It can also cause changes in your baby's heart rate. We will monitor you and your baby closely for any changes.

What are the risks?

Epidurals are safe, but they can cause side effects.

Common side effects include a drop in blood pressure and a potential uneven block, which we can treat.

Less common complications include severe headaches.

Very rare complications include temporary nerve damage, infection, a very high epidural block, and epidural blood clot. Severe injury or paralysis is extremely rare.

For more information

If you have any questions, or want more information, talk to your obstetrician or midwife. They can arrange for you to speak with an anaesthetist.

Acute Pain Service, The Royal Women's Hospital

Monday to Friday 8am to 4pm
T: (03) 8345 2389

Do you need an interpreter?



You can ask for an interpreter if you need one.

Family Violence Support

1800 Respect National Helpline

You can get help if you have experienced sexual assault, domestic or family violence and abuse.

You can call any time of day or night.

1800 737 732

1800respect.org.au