

Epidural Anesthesia

What is an epidural?

An epidural is one method used to ease the discomfort of labor contractions. Many women find the contractions of their uterus and the stretching of the birth canal very uncomfortable. At Wishard Health Services, we support your choice of pain management. If you have questions about ways to manage and control your pain, please ask your care provider.

What will happen if I ask for an epidural?

An anesthesiologist, a doctor trained in controlling pain, will talk with you to be sure you understand the procedure and the process. If you choose to have an epidural:

- Your nurse will help get you into a sitting position while you lean forward.
- The doctor will numb the skin around two of the lowest backbones (vertebra).
- A needle will be placed between these bones and will NOT enter the spinal cord area.
- Your nurse will help you stay very still while the epidural is being placed.
- A tiny tube, called a catheter, will then be threaded into the needle, and the needle will be removed.
- After the catheter is placed, the tubing will be attached to a pump, which will continuously give you pain medication. Medication to decrease your discomfort will go through the tube for the rest of your labor and for the birth of your baby.
- The tube will be removed after the birth of your baby.

How long does it take to get an epidural?

Every woman is different, but it usually takes about 15 minutes for the epidural to be placed. Pain relief will begin and continue to improve 10 – 15 minutes later.

Can I move if I have an epidural?

Women who have epidurals are encouraged to move around in bed to get comfortable. The tube is carefully taped in place, but you must be careful not to slide on your lower back because this could pull out the tube carrying the medicine. It is very important that you do not attempt to get out of bed without talking with your nurse so that she can be with you when you stand up.

Will this medication hurt my baby?

Epidurals are considered safe for babies.

Does an epidural make all the pain go away?

Epidurals make contractions feel less intense and easier to manage. Some pressure may still be felt in the rectum and in the vagina, especially toward the end of labor. At Wishard, our doctors work with each woman to find the best and safest balance of medicine for pain relief. Ask your nurse to call the anesthesiologist if you have questions or concerns about your pain relief. There is an anesthesia doctor assigned to the care of laboring women 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Do epidurals always work?

For most women, the epidural will provide pain relief. However, sometimes the medicine cannot get into the epidural space, so it does not work at all or only takes away some of the pain. In about 1 in 20 women, pain relief is one-sided or patchy. The anesthesiologist can usually improve your pain management should this occur, most often without needing to reinsert the needle or replace the tube.

Are there any side effects from an epidural?

The most common possible side effects include:

- Numb and heavy legs – This is normal and will disappear after the medicine is stopped.
- Low blood pressure – This can be easily treated.
- Back tenderness where the needle and tube were inserted – This tenderness might last for a few days, but research does not show that epidurals cause long-term back pain.
- Moderate to severe headaches after the epidural – This happens in two or three women out of every one hundred and is not permanent or life threatening. Treatment is available for severe headaches.
- Itching, mild sleepiness or difficulty urinating – These problems last only a short time and go away by themselves or with treatment.
- Fever not caused by an infection – This fever is not dangerous for the mother or her baby.
- Longer labors – This side effect only happens for some women.

After the birth of their baby, some women may develop minor neurological problems such as a small area of numbness on one leg. These types of problems are very uncommon and almost always go away over time. Women who do not have an epidural when they give birth can also have this problem. Permanent neurological problems, such as paralysis, can occur with any type of anesthetic procedure, but this type of problem is very uncommon with epidurals.

Does an epidural increase the chances of a cesarean birth?

Some health care providers believe that epidurals may increase the chance of cesarean births (delivery of the baby through an incision in the mother's abdomen and uterus), but others disagree. You should talk to your own prenatal care providers to learn their thoughts about epidurals and other choices for pain relief during childbirth.

Are there women who cannot have an epidural?

Yes. Women who have had some types of lower back surgery and may have rods in their lower back, those with blood clotting or bleeding disorders and those with neurological problems are not able to have an epidural.