

## *North Carolina Women's Hospital*

### **EPIDURAL ANALGESIA: ONE CHOICE FOR PAIN RELIEF IN LABOR**

#### **What is an epidural?**

An epidural is one method used to ease the discomfort of labor contractions. Many women find contractions of their uterus and stretching of the birth canal very uncomfortable. At NC Women's Hospital we support your choice of pain management. If you have questions about ways to decrease the need for pain medicines or about other choices of pain control, ask your care provider.

#### **What will happen if I ask for an epidural?**

An anesthesiologist, a doctor specially trained in controlling pain, will talk with you to be sure you understand what an epidural is. If you choose to have an epidural, this is how it will be done:

- 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.
- The needle will **not** enter the spinal cord area.
- Your nurse will help you stay very still while the epidural is being put in place.
- A tiny tube will then be threaded into the needle and the needle will be removed.
- Medicine to decrease your discomfort will go through the tube for the rest of your labor and 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?**

It usually takes about 10 minutes to have the tube for the medicine put in place. For some women it can take longer. Pain relief begins about 10 or 15 minutes later, and works even better in another 10-15 minutes.

#### **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. Some women with epidurals can walk to the bathroom or around their room. 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 an epidural hurt my baby?**

Epidurals are considered safe for babies.

#### **Does an epidural make all the pain go away?**

Epidurals make the contractions feel less strong and easier to manage. Some pressure may still be felt in the rectum and in the vagina, especially toward the end of labor. At NC Women's Hospital, our doctors work with each woman to find the best and safest balance of medicine for pain relief with the ability to move and to push the baby out. 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.

#### **Do epidurals always work?**

For most women, the epidural will provide pain relief. However, sometimes the medicines cannot get into the epidural space so they cannot work. In about 1 in 20 women, pain relief is one-sided or patchy. The anesthesiologist can usually do something about this, most often without needing to reinsert the needle or replace the

tube.

### **Are there any side effects from an epidural?**

These are the most common possible side effects:

- Numb and heavy legs. This is normal and will disappear after the medicine is stopped.
- Low blood pressure. This can be treated easily.
- 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 in 100 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 for some women.

There are also some rare side effects:

- After the birth of their baby, some women develop minor neurologic problems such as a small area of numbness on one leg. Such problems are very uncommon and almost always go away over time. Women who did not have an epidural when they gave birth can also have this problem. Permanent neurologic 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 increase the chance of cesarean births 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?**

There are some women who cannot have an epidural. Examples include:

- Women with some types of problems with blood clotting or bleeding
- Women with some neurology problems
- Women who have had some types of lower back surgery

Talk to your doctor or nurse if you have any questions or concerns about having an epidural.