



Childbirth and Anesthesia

You're having a baby! You're likely excited and no doubt nervous about several things — including the hard work and pain of labor. Fortunately, there are a number of options available to ease the pain, ranging from medications to breathing techniques.

Every woman's labor and level of pain are different. It's important that you work with your health care providers, including your physician anesthesiologist, to decide what pain management methods are best for you. You may prefer to use little or no pain medication or may feel pain medication will give you better control and make labor and delivery a more enjoyable experience. It's also acceptable to change methods or use a combination during the course of your labor and delivery. Ultimately, the choice is yours.

How Can You Ease Labor Pain?

Epidural

This is the most common type of labor pain relief. If you choose to have an epidural, a physician anesthesiologist will insert a needle and tiny tube, called a catheter, in the lower part of your back. An epidural numbs only the lower part of your body below your belly button and allows you to be awake and alert throughout labor, as well as feel pressure to push when it's time to deliver your baby. It can take about 15 minutes for the pain medication to work, but you can continue to receive it as long as you need it and increase or decrease the amount you receive as necessary.

Spinal block

This can be used alone or combined with an epidural. A physician anesthesiologist provides pain-relieving medication through a needle inserted in the lower back into the spinal canal. You'll feel no pain, only numbness from your abdomen to your legs. A spinal block can be used for vaginal childbirth as well as for a planned cesarean section, or C-section. The pain relief is immediate and lasts from one and a half to three hours, but it could wear off before your baby is delivered.

Analgesics

Pain medications (opioid and non-opioid) are delivered through an intravenous (IV) line into a vein or injected into a muscle. Analgesics can temporarily relieve pain but don't eliminate it.

General anesthesia

This is the only type of pain medication used during labor that makes you lose consciousness. It works quickly and is typically used only if you need an emergency C-section or have another urgent medical problem (such as bleeding). You will not be awake for the birth of your baby.

Complementary methods of managing labor:

Massage – Have your partner massage your back or feet.

Breathing – From deep, slow breaths to grunting, there are many different ways to breathe through the pain of a contraction.

Visualization – You may find it helpful to picture yourself somewhere enjoyable – on a beach or walking through the forest.

Water – Soak in a tub or take a shower to soothe away some tension.

Are Epidurals Safe?

Many women who use medication to manage their pain during labor choose an epidural. While epidurals are very safe, you should be aware of some potential side effects including:

Decrease in blood pressure

The medication can lower your blood pressure, which can slow your baby's heart rate. To decrease this risk, you will be given extra fluids through a tube in your arm (IV line) and may need to lie on your side to increase blood flow.

Sore back

Your lower back may be temporarily sore where the needle was inserted to deliver the medication. This soreness shouldn't last more than a few days.

Headache

Rarely, the covering of the spinal cord may be pierced when the needle is placed, which can cause a headache that may last a few days if it is not treated.

Women sometimes ask if an epidural can slow labor or lead to a C-section. There is no evidence that it does.

To decrease the possibility of side effects, ask for a physician anesthesiologist to be involved in your pain control plan.

Who Provides Anesthesia During Labor?

Before you give birth, talk to your physician to find out who will administer your anesthesia if you decide to have pain medication during your labor. Your anesthesia care should be led by a physician anesthesiologist, a medical doctor specializing in anesthesia, pain, and critical care medicine, who works with your other physicians to develop and administer your anesthesia care plan. With 12 to 14 years of education and 12,000 to 16,000 hours of clinical training, these highly trained medical specialists ensure safe, high-quality care.

About the American Society of Anesthesiologists®

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