



## Anesthesia for Childbirth

Having a baby is one of the most exciting times in a woman's life—but it can also be a little scary. Each woman's labor and delivery experience is unique, so it only makes sense to manage the experience in a way that is right for YOU.

A significant part of that experience involves pain management, and specifically anesthesia. Whether you want pain relief, would prefer a natural birth, or are unsure of how different pain relief methods will affect you and your baby, understanding the options can help you make informed decisions that will lead to a more enjoyable labor and delivery. No matter what, the choice is yours, and you can always change your mind.

### Ways to relieve labor pain

#### *Epidural*

You've no doubt heard lots of discussion about epidurals, particularly because they are the most common form of pain relief during labor. In this procedure, an anesthesiologist or certified registered nurse anesthetist (CRNA) inserts a needle and a tiny tube (catheter) into the small of your back, just outside your spinal canal. This allows the delivery of local anesthetics that numb only the lower part of your body, allowing you to remain awake and alert throughout labor as well as continue to feel touch and pressure. This type of anesthesia allows most women to fully participate in the birth experience while relieving most, if not all, of the pains of labor.

Epidurals are typically administered when cervical dilation reaches four to five centimeters. It can take about 15 minutes to feel the effects of the medication, but you can continue to receive it for as long as you need it. Your anesthesiologist or CRNA can increase or decrease the amount as necessary along the way.

While epidurals are very safe, some number of women may experience side effects. These could include a decrease in your blood pressure which, in turn, could slow your baby's heart rate. This risk can be decreased by giving the patient extra fluids through an IV line. Some women have noted soreness in the back at the spot where the needle was inserted, but this normally recedes within a few days. 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 not treated.

#### *Spinal block*

This method, sometimes called intrathecal, can be used alone or combined with an epidural. It is similar to an epidural in that the pain-relieving medication is introduced with a needle into



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the lower back, but because the drugs are administered directly into the spinal canal, the effects are usually felt much faster. A spinal block numbs the area from your abdomen to your legs, so you may need help with moving during the delivery.

Spinal anesthetics can be used for vaginal childbirth as well as for a planned cesarean section, or sometimes when forceps must be used. Note that while a spinal block brings immediate pain relief, it generally lasts from one-and-a-half to three hours and could wear off before delivery.

There are some times when an epidural or a spinal block should not be used. These include:

- When time is of the essence.
- When the patient uses blood thinners or has a bleeding tendency.
- When the patient is hemorrhaging or is in shock.
- When the patient has an infection in the back or in the blood.
- When the patient has a spinal abnormality or another anatomic condition.

### *Analgesics*

An analgesic is simply another word for pain medication. Opioid and non-opioid pain medications can be 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*

General anesthesia is the only type of pain medication used during labor that makes you lose consciousness; consequently it is normally only used when complications arise and time is of the essence (e.g. emergency C-section, excessive bleeding, etc.). These types of drugs can be administered quickly and are typically given via an IV line or by having the patient breathe gases. With general anesthesia, you will not be awake for the birth of your baby.

### **Key points**

If you decide to use an anesthetic to help with labor and delivery, here are a few key points that may assist you in deciding which method is best for you. The ideal anesthetic should:

- Provide enough pain relief to allow you to deliver your baby with minimal pain and anxiety, leaving you free to fully participate in the experience.
- Allow you to push when it is time to do so.

The ideal anesthetic will not stop contractions or make your baby sleepy.