Epidural Anesthesia For Childbirth

Epidural anesthesia (often called “an epidural”) is medicine given through a catheter (a thin, flexible tube) in your back. Epidural anesthesia relieves pain during labor and pushing in a vaginal delivery.

**Placing the epidural.**
All support people will be asked to leave the room while the epidural is put in.

**The nurse will:**
- Call the anesthesiologist as soon as you ask for an epidural.
- Give you fluids through your IV.
- Help you get into position for the epidural.
- Help you breathe and relax during the procedure.
- Take your blood pressure before, during and after the procedure.

**The anesthesiologist will**
- Clean the skin on your lower back. This may feel cold.
- Give you several small shots of numbing medicine in your back. The shots feel like bee stings. The stinging goes away quickly.
- Put the epidural catheter in after your skin is numb.
- Give you a small dose of medicine to make sure the catheter is in the right place.

**Anesthesiologist:** A doctor with special training in pain relief and giving anesthesia.

**What you will be asked to do.**
- Sit forward on the side of your bed or lie on your side.
- Try to sit or lie as still as you can, breathing slowly.
- Tell the doctor when you are having a contraction.
Benefits of having an epidural during labor.
- You can be awake and alert when your baby is born.
- Less medicine gets to the baby than when other medicines (like narcotics) are given.
- Helps you relax if your labor is long or hard.

Side effects and risks of epidurals during labor
Common:
- Shivering: Ask the nurse for a warm blanket.
- Low blood pressure: This usually does not last long. It is treated with extra IV fluids, a change in position or medicine.
- Backache for a few days.
- It is common for women to feel some pressure or discomfort.

Less common:
- Spinal headache: This can last for several days and may need treatment.
- Some patients do not get full pain relief.
- The epidural may wear off during labor.
- The anesthesiologist may not be able to get the epidural in place.

Very rare:
- Epidural medicine can get in a blood vessel and cause:
  - Dizziness
  - A racing heart
  - A seizure
- Epidural medicine can get in the spinal fluid and make it hard to breathe.
- Nerve damage
- Infection
- Bruising
- Death

Pain relief.
You will start to feel pain relief 10 - 20 minutes after you get the medicine.

Women who may not be able to get an epidural are women with:
- Bleeding or clotting problems
- Skin infections on their backs
- Backbone problems

Ways to deal with pain without using an epidural.
- Pain medicine through your IV
- Breathing or relaxation exercises
- Hydrotherapy

If you have any questions about your pain, medicine or anesthesia, ask your nurse, midwife or anesthesiologist.