

Script – Print – Finding Comfort during Labor

Fifty Percent of Women Use Epidural Anesthesia

Giving birth, while a joyous occasion, can also be uncomfortable for the mother-to-be. There is no one size fits all approach for the birthing journey, and pain management in particular is a very personal decision when it comes to labor. For some, a birth with no pain medication tops the list of must-haves. For others, a little help for the pain is a welcome relief.

That's where epidural anesthesia often comes in. If appropriate, an epidural can be an extremely helpful pain management tool for a woman ready to deliver her child. It works quickly and can begin relieving pain within 15 to 20 minutes with minimal side effects for both mom and baby.

"An epidural is a form of pain relief for women who are in labor," says Dr. Christina Kramer, OB/GYN, OSF HealthCare. "Basically, that's where our anesthesia colleagues come in and put in a small catheter or tube along the tail of the spinal cord and bathe it in a long-acting anesthetic to provide pain relief when a woman is laboring."

According to the American Pregnancy Association, more than 50% of women giving birth at hospitals use epidural anesthesia. The medication provides pain relief for as long as needed during the birthing process.

There are many benefits of receiving epidural anesthesia. It allows the patient to rest if the labor is prolonged, it can help with fatigue, help mom remain alert and active in the birth and by reducing the discomfort, can lead to a more positive birth experience.

There are some risks associated with epidurals such as bleeding, infection, nausea, chills, ringing of the ears and headache.

"There are some small risks with any type of anesthesia," says Dr. Kramer. "The anesthesia provider would always go through those with the patient. One of the more common risks is something called a spinal headache where if the sac that surrounds the spinal cord is punctured by the needle, some cerebral spinal fluid or CSF could leak out and that can cause a severe headache for women. There are treatments for that, but that is one thing to look out for."

There are times when an epidural is not recommended, such as if the patient has a blood infection, uses blood thinners or is not at least four centimeters dilated.

According to Dr. Kramer, epidural should not impact the mother's ability to push or lead to a C-section. According to the American Pregnancy Association there are other factors that would call for a C-section, including the size or position of the baby. Experts believe that epidurals can speed the first stage of labor by letting the mother relax.

"I would say in my experience most women feel an urge to push or can be taught with coaching in order to push so it shouldn't increase the C-section rate," says Dr. Kramer, "and current obstetrical guidelines do allow for a longer time frame with pushing before recommending a C-section to account for that learning curve that new moms have to go through."

While epidural isn't for everyone, it's another helpful tool to have available if needed should the patient need relief from any discomfort. With any medical procedure, it's best to consult with your physician if you have any concerns or questions.

"I think it's a really nice option for women to have in labor," says Dr. Kramer. "We're not forcing women to get epidurals and not all women require epidurals but it's nice to have the option if the pain becomes intense for labor. And I think moms have a more ideal birth experience and for some women it's really important that they have absolutely no pain and that's a nice adjunct to have."

For more information about pregnancy and birth, please visit [OSF HealthCare](#).