

Pain Relief Options for Labor

There are pharmaceutical methods of pain relief as well as many self-help options. The pharmaceutical choices include:

- Opioid drugs such as Demerol, pethidine, and Meptid
- Epidural and spinal anesthesia
- Entonox (oxygen & nitrous oxide)

The most common self-help methods include:

- relaxation
- breathing patterns
- TENS (Transcutaneous Electronic Nerve Stimulation)
- movement
- vocalization
- massage
- warm water or warm compresses
- distraction techniques
- self-hypnosis
- complementary therapies

Do I Need to Choose Beforehand?

It's very difficult to know beforehand what your labor is going to be like and how you will cope with any pain. For this reason, it can be helpful to remain open-minded about pain relief options. Instead of

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deciding exactly what you will do, be aware of all the options available to you, understand the benefits and disadvantages of each option, and wait and see. If your support team understands your preferences and the way you would like your labor to go, they can help you during labor to use the method of pain relief that you prefer and to help remind you of the pros and cons of each option.

Where Can I Get Information?

You could speak with your doctor or midwife about their view on pain relief and self-help methods. This will help you to anticipate any differences in opinion, if they exist, between you and your caregiver. There are lots of books available that cover pain relief in more detail. You could check out the Internet, doing a search on “pain,” “relief,” and “labor”. There are a lot of personal accounts, medical information, and facts about different pain relief options. You may find it helpful to explain to your caregivers that you will ask for pain relief if you need it and that you do not want to have it offered to you in labor. This way you will not feel pressured to use drugs if that is not what you want.

Opioid Drugs

Opioids are drugs, similar to morphine, that are injected into your thigh or given through a drip. They are commonly used for pain relief after surgery. Opioids include Demerol, pethidine, and Meptid.

Benefits of opioids

- If you are tired, it can give you a chance to rest
- After the opioid wears off, you can continue with labor
- If you are very tense, it may relax you and result in labor speeding up
- If labor is very long and you are stressed, opioids might relax you and this can have a positive effect on the baby

Risks of Opioids

- Many people do not like the distancing feeling that an opioid gives
- Some find that the drug did not remove the pain

- It can make you feel out of control and unable to move or communicate
- You might sleep for the beginning part of a contraction, only being aware of the peak of each contraction
- It can cause nausea, so is usually given with an anti-nausea drug
- Because you cannot remain upright as easily, you will be less mobile which might slow labor down
- Once you have taken it, the effect cannot be turned off - you must wait for it to wear off
- The drug crosses the placenta and takes a relatively long time for the baby to metabolize - this can result in the baby being born with breathing difficulties (if this happens, your baby will probably be given an antidote to help with breathing)
- Babies exposed to opioids during labor are sometimes sleepy, have difficulty in breastfeeding, and can be fractious in the early days

What is the expected effect?

The drug is intended to distance you from the pain of contractions. Once the injection is given, it takes about 20 minutes for it to become effective.

How long will the effect last?

This depends on the amount given. A dose of 100mg usually lasts for about four hours, but this does depend on the body mass of the individual. A person with a smaller frame will be affected for longer than one with a larger frame taking the same dose.

When is it best to take it?

Because of the time it takes for your baby to metabolize this drug, it is best not to have it within four hours of giving birth. It is difficult to assess how long before the birth will occur, but as a guideline, it is better to take opioids before you are 7cm dilated.

What can you do to help yourself if you use this method?

Since opioids are mood enhancers, you will have a better chance of finding them helpful if you feel positive about taking them beforehand. Take the view that you need a rest, that the opioid will help you to sleep for a couple of hours, and that then you can carry on with labor with more energy.

You could try asking for a smaller than normal dose (either 25mg or 50mg) to see if you like the effect first, then have a top-up if you find it helps.

Ask your support team to watch the monitor and wake you as soon as they see a contraction starting. That way you are aware of the whole contraction and less likely to only remember the painful part of each one.

Ask for an internal examination before you take opioid drugs. If you are very early in labor and finding it difficult to cope, you may then choose to have it. Alternatively, if you are nearing the end of the first stage, you may want to continue without it so as to avoid the side effects on your baby.

Epidural Anesthesia

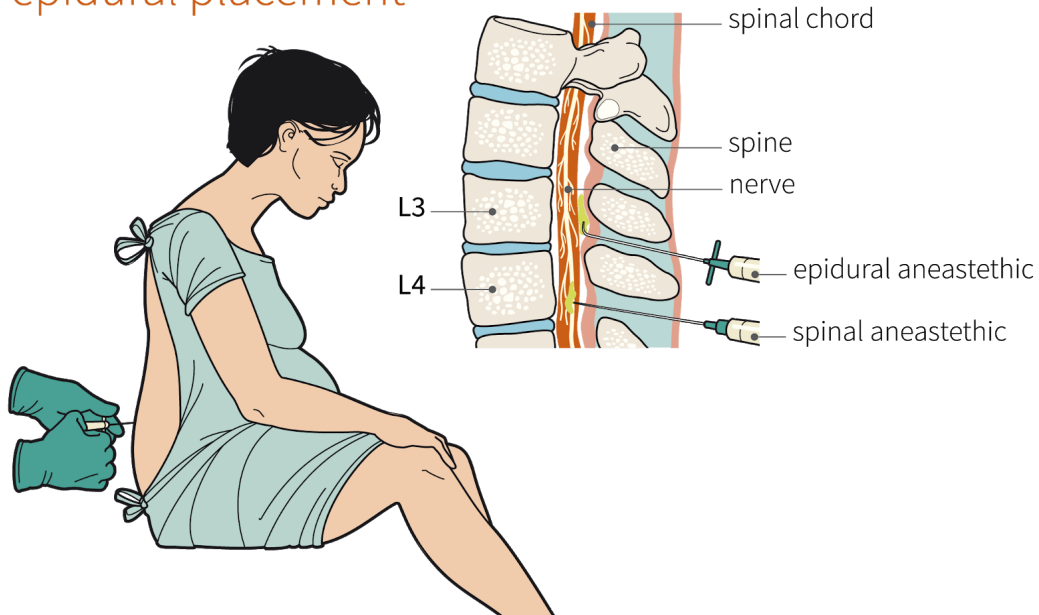
Epidural anesthesia is a combination of local anesthetics that are injected into the epidural space around your spine. A needle is inserted into the small of your back, and a fine catheter is passed through the needle. The needle is then removed, leaving the catheter in place, and the drugs are injected down a tube into the catheter. The tube is taped up over your shoulder so the drugs can be topped up if necessary. While the epidural is being inserted you will be asked to lie down in a curled up position or to sit on the bed and bend forward. You may then be asked to lie first on one side, then the other, to allow the drugs to be distributed evenly in your body. An anesthetist administers an epidural.

Benefits of Epidurals

- Tends to lower blood pressure, so it can benefit you if you have high blood pressure
- If you have a medical condition that makes pushing inadvisable, an epidural may help
- If you are particularly stressed, anxious, in extreme pain, or exhausted, an epidural may help to relax you and allow labor to speed up
- You will feel no pain if the epidural is effective

- You can remain awake and your partner/supporter can be present if an epidural is used for a cesarean
- You can breastfeed and have contact with your baby immediately after a cesarean
- If you are stressed, this can have an effect on the baby - an epidural might relax you and therefore benefit the baby
- Your baby is able to have contact with you and your partner/supporters immediately after birth

epidural placement



Risks of epidurals

- Epidurals do not always work - sometimes only one side becomes anesthetised, or might have “patches” where you still have feeling
- There is a lot of equipment associated with an epidural - the epidural catheter in your back, a drip in your hand, a catheter to empty bladder, a blood pressure cuff that inflates regularly, and an electronic monitor around your tummy, so you might feel “wired up” or a lack of control

- The drugs in epidurals relax muscle tone, so the baby is less likely to turn into a good position for birth, leading to an increased risk of malpositioning
- You might not feel the pushing urge during the second stage - this increases the risk of assisted delivery (forceps or ventouse) and cesarean section
- The lack of mobility and upright stance may slow labor down
- An epidural can cause nausea, vomiting, and shaking
- If you are lying down, labor may be longer which can lead to distress in the baby
- If the baby needs to be born with the assistance of forceps or vacuum (ventouse), there is a slight risk of injury to the baby
- Epidurals increase the risk of jaundice due to the common use of oxytocic drugs and the need for additional intravenous fluids with an epidural

What is the expected effect?

The drugs cause the lower half of your body to become numb so you have little or no feeling. It will take about 10-20 minutes, after an anesthetist has arrived, to insert the catheter and the needle. Once the drugs are injected, you will feel a tingly feeling within a few minutes.

How long will the effect last?

It will depend on the amount of anesthetic administered. As the effect starts to wear off, you can have a top-up. Sometimes the epidural anesthetics are given through a continuous infusion so in order for it to begin wearing off, you need to have the infusion turned down very low or off altogether. Many anesthetists use lower dosage drugs, which enable more feeling in the legs and upright positions during labor. Once an epidural has been given it's usually left in place until your baby is born. Sometimes it is allowed to wear off for the second stage so you can still feel the urge to push.

When is it best to take?

An epidural is available at any time in labor but it is better to wait until contractions are well established before it is given.

What can you do to help yourself if you use this method?

Since you will no longer be able to move around as easily, it will become difficult to remain upright. You could try lying on your side so that your sacrum and coccyx can still move as your baby moves down.

Ask for an internal examination before having the epidural. If you are almost at the end of the first stage of labor, you may want to continue without it.

Entonox (Gas & Air or Nitrous Oxide)

Entonox is a mixture of nitrous oxide and oxygen. It is inhaled through a face mask or a small plastic tube and is self-administered.

Benefits of Entonox

- Entonox can take the edge off the pain without a significant feeling of loss of control
- You determine how much and when you need the Entonox, so it is completely under your own control
- If you do not like the sensation, you can stop taking it and the effect wears off within seconds-minutes
- As you are breathing in more oxygen, your baby might benefit from this
- This drug crosses the placenta but is quickly metabolized so has minimal effect on the baby
- Provided the Entonox is available in a portable gas cylinder, you could use in a birthing pool or if you were laboring off the bed

Risks of Entonox

- Entonox may not be very effective at helping you cope with the pain
- This is not a very effective drug if used over a long period of time
- You might feel nauseous

- Some people do not like the feeling of a face mask to deliver the Entonox - a mouthpiece might be available which can feel less claustrophobic

While there are several older studies showing risks to the baby these were done at a time that the proportion of nitrous oxide to oxygen was much higher than is used today. No recent research showing any documented disadvantages to the baby.

What is the expected effect?

Entonox gives a sensation of distancing from the pain. The effect is almost immediate. Once you begin breathing the Entonox, you will feel it take effect within a few seconds.

How long will the effect last?

As soon as you stop breathing it in the drugs stop taking effect within a few seconds.

When is it best to take?

It is best to take Entonox once labor is established. As a general guideline, this is when the cervix is around 6cm dilated. You can continue taking Entonox right throughout labor, although it is not a very effective drug over a long period of time.

What can you do to help yourself if you use this method?

Begin breathing the Entonox in as soon as a contraction starts, and stop breathing it once the contraction is at its peak. This way you are less likely to feel groggy after the contraction has finished.

Relaxation

There are many types of relaxation that can be helpful during labor. These include:

- focusing on the baby
- visualisation techniques
- meditation
- self-hypnosis

- going with contractions

Benefits of relaxation

- Relaxation allows a greater feeling of control over the process of labor
- Using relaxation techniques can help improve the efficiency of contractions and speed labor up.
- You remain clear-headed and able to communicate
- If you are relaxing you are more likely to be breathing well, increasing the amount of oxygen available to your baby

Risks of relaxation

- Relaxation may not be effective enough at dealing with the pain
- There are no known disadvantages to the baby

What is the expected effect?

Relaxation encourages effective breathing. This in turn leads to an increase in the amount of oxygen in the body, helping the uterus to contract more efficiently. It also helps to alleviate fear and tension, both of which tend to increase pain perception. Relaxation increases your level of endorphins, which are the body's natural pain-relieving hormones. Relaxation has an effect immediately.

How long will the effect last?

As long as you continue to practice relaxation it will continue to have some effect. The level of effectiveness depends on your feelings, the level at which you are relaxing, and the amount of pain you are experiencing.

When is it best to use?

It is best to practice relaxation right throughout labor. Even if you are having an epidural or a cesarean birth, relaxation can benefit you and your baby.

What can you do to help yourself if you use this method?

Practice relaxation techniques before you go into labor. It is a skill that requires practice to be most effective.

Have lots of ideas beforehand on what sorts of things you can do to relax. Then you are more likely to find something that works for you.

Discuss relaxation techniques with your support team so they are aware of the types of things you would like to try and can remind you during labor.

Explain to your caregiver that you would like to use relaxation in labor. They are more likely to be supportive if they understand your preferences.

Be prepared to use different techniques at different times. As labor changes you may need to change the relaxation methods you are using.

Towards the end of the first stage of labor you may find you are unable to focus on relaxation techniques. If this happens, try relaxing in between contractions instead, conserving as much energy as you can.

Breathing Patterns

You obviously will continue to breathe throughout labor. However, you could try using different breathing techniques to help deal with contractions. These may include:

- deep breathing at the beginning of labor
- focusing on your out-breath
- finding a rhythm to your breathing e.g. Step, breathe, sweep, breathe
- “hoo-hoo-ha” type patterns when in transition
- tiny breaths, as if you were trying to make a candle flicker, in transition
- panting

Benefits of breathing patterns

- Breathing techniques allow a greater feeling of control over the process of labor
- Using breathing techniques can help improve the efficiency of contractions and speed labor up
- You remain clear headed and able to communicate
- If you are breathing well you will also be relaxing well, increasing the amount of oxygen available to your baby

Risks of breathing patterns

- Breathing techniques may not be effective enough at dealing with the pain
- There are no known disadvantages to the baby

What is the expected effect?

Breathing can help to relax you and reduce tension and fear. It also leads to an increase in endorphins. If you breathe effectively, your uterus and your baby will both be receiving more oxygen. Breathing goes hand in hand with relaxation and movement. Breathing techniques can have an effect immediately.

How long will the effect last?

As long as you continue to breathe at a level that feels comfortable it will continue to have some effect. The level of effectiveness depends on your feelings, the level at which you are relaxing, and the amount of pain you are experiencing.

When is it best to use?

It is best to practice effective breathing right throughout labor. Even if you are having an epidural or a cesarean birth, slow and calm breathing can benefit both you and your baby.

What can you do to help yourself if you use this method?

Practice breathing techniques before you go into labor. It is a skill that requires practice to be most effective.

Try out different types of breathing so you have lots of ideas beforehand on what sorts of things you can do to focus on your breathing. Then you are more likely to find something that works for you.

Discuss breathing techniques with your support team so they are aware of the types of things you would like to try and can remind you during labor.

Explain to your caregivers that you would like to use breathing techniques in labor. They are more likely to be supportive if they understand your preferences.

Be prepared to use different techniques at different times. As labor changes you may need to change the breathing techniques you are using.

Towards the end of the first stage of labor you may find you begin to hyperventilate. You will know this if your hands or face feel tingly and numb. Try concentrating on just your out-breath and slow down your breathing as much as possible. If this is not effective, breathe into your cupped hands for a short time.

TENs (Transcutaneous Electronic Nerve Stimulation)

A TENs machine is a small electronic unit with four long wires attached. Small pads connect the wires to four points on the small of the back. The pads are taped in place. A small pulse runs from the unit to the pads on your back. There is a handheld boost button for you to increase the intensity of the pulse during a contraction.



Benefits of TENs

- You control the unit yourself, deciding what level the stimulation should be at and when to use the boost button

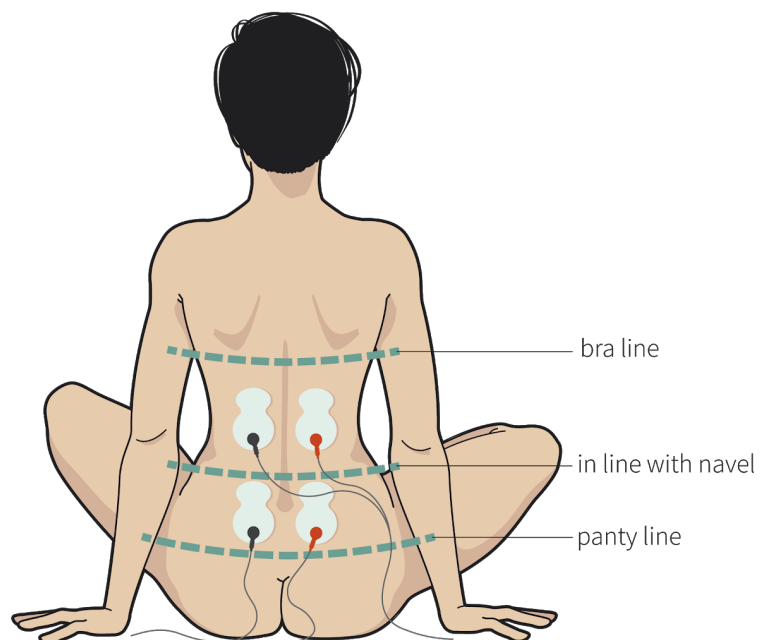
- You remain clear-headed and able to communicate
- The unit will help to increase endorphin levels
- As the unit may help you to relax, you are more likely to be breathing well, increasing the amount of oxygen available to your baby

Risks of TENS

- The unit may not be effective enough at dealing with the pain
- It cannot be used in the water
- It can be difficult to massage around the unit
- You will need to hire a unit and book it in advance or purchase one unless your planned place of birth has them available
- There are no known disadvantages to the baby

What is the expected effect?

The unit sends out a constant pulse, blocking pain signals from reaching the brain, and increasing endorphin levels. The unit has a small boost button that can increase the intensity of the stimulation for a short period of time. It can take some time before the unit begins to be effective. It takes about 20 minutes for endorphin levels to build up once the unit is connected.



How long will the effect last?

As long as you continue to leave the unit operating, it can remain effective to some degree throughout labor.

When is it best to use?

It is best to attach the unit right at the beginning of labor and leave it attached while it is still feeling effective.

What can you do to help yourself if you use this method?

Place the unit on early in labor.

Have a bath before putting it on if you want to go in the water.

Take extra adhesive with you to hospital in case you need it, together with extra batteries.

Make sure you discuss your desire to use TENS with your doctor or midwife beforehand in case the hospital has a policy of not allowing its use.

Movement

Movement and the use of upright positions are often referred to as “active birth.” This basically means moving around into different positions that use gravity to assist the birth of a baby and allow you to find positions in which you are comfortable.

Benefits of movement

- You will be free to move into comfortable positions
- You may feel more in control of your labor
- Gravity helps your baby’s descent and can shorten labor
- Movement may help with back pain
- Movement may help your baby into a favorable position

- May help to get adequate oxygen to your baby, reducing the possibility of fetal distress

Risks of movement

- May not be enough to cope with the pain
- May not have the support of the hospital
- There are no known disadvantages to the baby

What is the expected effect?

Being upright and moving around in labor can help your baby to get into a good position for birth, provide maximum space within the pelvis, and use gravity to assist the progress of labor. Most people find upright positions more comfortable during labor and, given the choice, will usually move quite frequently. This can lead to an increase in relaxation. If you are feeling relaxed and your tension and fear levels are reduced, you are likely to experience less pain in labor. As soon as you are upright and moving into positions that you feel comfortable in, you will probably notice an effect.

How long will the effect last?

As long as you continue to remain upright and mobile, if that is what you want, this method can remain effective to some degree throughout labor.

When is it best to use?

It is best to begin using upright positions and moving when you want to from the outset of labor. However, you can begin at any point and there can still be a benefit.

What can you do to help yourself if you use this method?

Practice different positions beforehand. You are more likely to use them if they have become familiar to you.

Try not to get onto the bed at any point during labor. Once you are there, it can be very difficult to get down.

Discuss this with your doctor or midwife beforehand. They may be happy for you to use upright positions during the first stage but want you to get on the bed for the second stage. If this is not what you want,

discuss it with them until you have reached a solution that is agreeable to you both. They may not feel confident helping you to deliver your baby in a position that is not commonly used.

Vocalization

Vocalization uses sound to relieve tension during labor - this may involve groaning, yelling, moaning, singing, humming, or chanting.

Benefits of vocalization

- When you begin to feel tense you can use the method – it is instant
- You don't need any special equipment or practice
- It can be used in conjunction with all the other methods
- While you are making noise you are likely to be breathing well - the extra oxygen will benefit your baby

Risks of vocalization

- The method may not be effective enough at dealing with the pain
- Others may be uncomfortable about you making a lot of noise and discourage you from using it
- There are no known disadvantages to the baby

What is the expected effect?

Making noise releases tension and encourages effective breathing. Think of how you react when you burn yourself – most people will cry out. Vocalization works as you use it. It is a way of releasing a build-up of tension.

How long will the effect last?

It can continue to be effective even if used during every contraction.

When is it best to use?

Whenever you feel tense or feel that a contraction is beginning to overwhelm you.

What can you do to help yourself if you use this method?

Use vocalization to be positive – saying “I can” or “yes” instead of “I can’t” or “no.”

Don’t be afraid to make noise – it is a normal way of releasing tension.

Try keeping the noise you make at low, deep levels - this can be a lot more effective than high-pitched screams as it relaxes the jaw and face.

Massage

Massage can be used to rub the back, shoulders, face, hands, tummy, legs, or feet.

Benefits of massage

- Can increase endorphin levels
- Can reduce tension, thereby increasing relaxation
- You can use it at any time throughout labor.
- You can use it in conjunction with any other pain relief method
- You remain clear-headed and able to communicate
- As massage may help you to relax, you are more likely to be breathing well, increasing the amount of oxygen available to your baby

Risks of massage

- Massage may not be effective enough at dealing with the pain
- It is difficult to use in the water
- It can be difficult to massage around a TENS unit

- You may not like to be touched during labor
- There are no known disadvantages to the baby

What is the expected effect?

Massage works by reducing tension and increasing relaxation as well as increasing the levels of endorphins in the area being massaged. Think about how you rub a child's bruised leg to make it feel better. Massage can be immediately effective. It works best if used during contractions and is done in the area where pain or tension are being felt most.

How long will the effect last?

As long as it continues, massage can continue to be effective to some degree.

When is it best to use?

It can be helpful from the beginning to the end of labor. It is better to vary the type of massage to suit the need at the time. Firm massage with the palm of the hand on the lower back is best for backache while long firm strokes down the thigh is most helpful during transition if your legs are shaking.

What can you do to help yourself if you use this method?

Remember to take massage oil to the hospital with you.

Don't expect massage to be helpful all the time. There may be stages where you do not want to be touched.

If the massage is irritating or not firm enough, say so.