



**ANZCA**  
FPM

## PATIENT INFORMATION

# Epidural anaesthesia

**Epidurals offer the most complete relief from contraction pain. They rapidly numb the lower body, but allow you to be aware during the birth of your baby. They can provide sustained pain relief that can be tailored to your needs to still allow a degree of movement and sensation.**

### **Why would I need an epidural?**

If the happy gas and morphine aren't keeping you comfortable enough – or there's a chance you'll require a caesarean delivery – your obstetrician may strongly recommend an epidural. There are also some medical reasons – such as if you're having twins or have high blood pressure – that make epidurals necessary.

### **How does the epidural work?**

Your anaesthetist will inject local anaesthetic – usually mixed with an opioid-based medication such as fentanyl – into the space around the spinal nerves in your lower back. This blocks the pain signals from contractions and cervical dilation travelling to your brain.

A fine plastic tube known as an “epidural catheter” is threaded through the epidural needle. This needle is then removed, leaving only the catheter, which is taped to your back and can be used to give more pain-relieving medication.

### **When can I request an epidural?**

As a general rule, you can request an epidural at any stage during labour provided there are no medical reasons that would prevent you from having one, and following consultation with the midwife and/or obstetrician. It usually takes between 15 and 30 minutes to insert an epidural. Local anaesthetic is then given through the epidural, with pain relief starting about 10 minutes later.

### **What if I need a caesarean ('c-section')?**

If a caesarean delivery is necessary, your anaesthetist can use the epidural to provide anaesthesia, making your body numb below the chest. Because this is a surgical procedure, the anaesthesia will be a lot stronger and your anaesthetist will be with you for the entire time. You'll usually be awake for the experience, except for those situations requiring general anaesthesia.



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As Australasia's leading authority on anaesthesia, ANZCA provides accessible, evidence-based information designed to help you make informed decisions. Scan the QR code to visit our website [anzca.edu.au](http://anzca.edu.au). This information is a guide only and should not replace information supplied by your anaesthetist.