Module 7
Coping with the Pain of Labor
Can I Have an Epidural to Help with Labor Pain?

- Yes. It’s an effective method of pain relief.
- However, an epidural given early in labor can interfere with the progress of labor and limit your ability to move and change positions.


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An Epidural Can Complicate Labor and Birth

An epidural can:

- Lower your blood pressure to a dangerous level;
- Slow down labor and make it necessary to use Pitocin to get labor going again;
- Make the use of forceps or a vacuum extractor more likely;
- Increase the risk for a perineal tear;¹
- Add up to two hours to the second stage of labor (pushing).²

An epidural can:

- Interfere with your body’s ability to eliminate heat and bring on a fever;
- Make it likely that you and your baby will be given antibiotics in case the fever was caused by an infection;
- Affect your baby’s heart rate;
- Make it more likely that your baby will need admission to a special care nursery;
- Increase the risk for a cesarean.

To Reduce the Disadvantages of the Epidural

- Try to wait until your cervix is dilated to 4-5 centimeters before having the epidural.
- To help the baby move through your pelvis and rotate for birth, try changing positions slowly while in bed every 20 to 30 minutes during labor. You may need some help.
- You may need to wait an hour or more before you feel you’re ready for active pushing.
- You may want to rest or sleep until you feel rectal pressure strong enough to push on your own.
- You may want to wait until the numbness of the epidural wears off before pushing.

There Are Many Comfort Measures to Help You Cope with Labor

- Change positions as often as you need to to make yourself more comfortable.
- Use hot or cold treatments.
- Use counter pressure or rolling pressure for back pain.
- Eat lightly and drink to increase your energy.
There Are Many Comfort Measures to Help You Cope with Labor

You can:

- Use music or aromatherapy;
- Use visualization, rhythmic breathing and relaxation, yoga or hypnobirthing techniques;
- Find out about touch therapy, massage, acupressure or acupuncture, water injections, and TENS (electrical stimulation);
- Use a tub or shower.

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Benefits of
Non-Drug Methods of Pain Relief

Non-drug methods of pain relief including continuous emotional support from a doula are beneficial for mothers and babies and do not cause harm.


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Every woman has her own way of coping with the pain of labor. Her choices should be respected.

An epidural is an effective method of pain relief but it can also complicate labor.

Using a variety of comfort measures helps mothers to cope with the pain of labor.
Checklist for Parents

- What options for pain relief are you considering?
- Do you think you’d like to try non-drug methods of pain relief?
- Remember that you may change your mind during labor. Stay flexible and you’ll find the best way to ease your pain.
- Try to use non-drug methods of pain relief and comfort measures before using drugs for pain relief.
- You may want to use music, aromatherapy, visualization, rhythmic breathing and relaxation, yoga or hypnobirthing techniques.
- Find out about touch therapy, massage, acupressure or acupuncture, water injections, and TENS (electrical stimulation).
Checklist for Parents

If you want an epidural:

- Try to wait until your cervix is dilated to 4-5 centimeters before it is given to you;
- To help the baby move through your pelvis and rotate for birth, try changing positions slowly while in bed every 20 to 30 minutes during labor. You may need some help;
- When you are fully dilated, you may need to wait an hour or more before you feel you’re ready for active pushing.
Checklist for Parents

If you want an epidural:

- You may want to rest or sleep until you feel rectal pressure strong enough to push on your own;
- You may want to wait until the numbness of the epidural wears off before pushing;
- With an epidural you may need up to three hours to push your baby out.
Resources for Mothers

- BirthTOOLS.org
  Prenatal Shared Decision-Making for Analgesia and Anesthesia in Labor

- The Birth Facts
  Medications and Their Impact on Labor and Birth

- National Childbirth Trust, U.K.
  Pain Relief During Labour

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Resources for Mothers

- American College of Nurse Midwives
  Share With Women, Epidural Analgesia, Using Water for Labor and Birth

- Childbirth Connection
  Cascade of Interventions

- Choices in Childbirth
  Straight Talk on Epidurals for Labor