

Managing pregnancy and labor pain

Pain management options for labor • Epidural for pain relief during childbirth



Pain management options for labor

Planning for labor

For most women, the contractions of labor can be an uncomfortable experience. Managing this discomfort and staying relaxed and calm improve your labor experience and help promote good labor progress. Attending a birth class can equip you with many helpful tips and suggestions on managing the discomfort of labor with or without medications, and can better help you make an informed decision about what will work best for you and your partner. We support whatever method you choose to help you with labor.

At UCLA, we support methods you might learn prior to your delivery, such as acupressure, hypnobirthing, yoga breath awareness, essential oils and mindful awareness.

Practice and planning are important. Think about what techniques might work best for you and practice with your partner/labor coach before the big day!

Common approaches to managing labor and pregnancy discomforts include:

- Walking
- Trying different positions that assist the labor process and ease the pain, such as:
 - Remaining upright while leaning or kneeling forward; try leaning forward over a birth ball or your bed
 - Squatting: You can hold onto the back of a sturdy chair while you squat, or squat against a wall
 - Half squatting while holding a bar or other form of support
 - Being on your hands and knees in an arch position
- Slow, focused breathing
- Focusing methods (for example, focusing your attention on parts of your body that are not in pain)
- Massages
- Birthing/yoga balls (you are welcome to bring them with you)
- Peanut balls (available in our labor and delivery units)
- Getting in the shower



Epidural for pain relief during childbirth

Helping you in your journey from labor to delivery

At the UCLA BirthPlace in Westwood and Santa Monica, we know each birth is a deeply personal and special journey.

We look forward to assisting you through this experience. The UCLA BirthPlace offers childbirth classes where you can learn about pain management options and strategies in labor. Talk to your partner and doctors about your questions, concerns and plans. The labor process is unpredictable, and your labor plans and goals can change abruptly. It is important to keep in mind that each experience is different and unique. Our goal is to ensure that you and your baby are healthy and safe.

Is an epidural right for me?

Childbirth is an intense process. The nature and degree of pain will differ among women. It is often described as the worst cramping a woman has ever felt. Some experience labor pain as a severe pulling, twisting or burning pain that can be felt in the abdomen and/or back. Only you can make the decision to have an epidural. Epidurals are extremely safe and effective. Having an epidural can drastically decrease your discomfort during labor. With your pain reduced, you are able to rest before delivery and prepare for the birthing process.

What is an epidural?

Epidural anesthesia is a form of pain relief. It is the most common choice of pain control in U.S. hospitals. An epidural will not significantly slow down the course of labor. Medications are delivered through a narrow tube called an epidural catheter. A doctor will place this catheter in your lower back. These medications decrease the impulses of nerves in your abdomen and the lower half of your body, which causes a decrease in pain sensation. It is normal to experience numbness, mild weakness in your legs and changes in temperature. The goal of the epidural is to significantly reduce labor pains. You will still feel your contractions, which will allow you to know when to push during delivery.

What should I expect during the epidural process?

The anesthesiologist will obtain a medical history and perform a physical exam before the epidural is placed.

You will need to have an intravenous (IV) catheter, and IV fluids will be administered prior to the placement of the epidural catheter.

The anesthesiologist will try to work with your contractions; however, you will likely experience some contractions during the procedure. You will be asked to sit at the edge of the bed or lie on your side and curl your back. After your lower back is cleaned, you will feel a pinprick and burning sensation as numbing medicine is used to prepare your back for the procedure. It is important to be still while the epidural is being placed. If you feel like you have to move, please tell your anesthesiologist. Once the catheter is placed, it is secured to the back with tape.

Within 20 minutes, you will feel significant pain relief. It is normal to have some numbness; however, the dose can be adjusted to minimize weakness in your legs.

What are the possible side effects of the epidural?

You might have some itching or nausea. Please let your anesthesiologist know. Sometimes the epidural medication can be adjusted to relieve this.

Less commonly, you might have a transient decrease in blood pressure or an increase in body temperature.

After the epidural is removed, you may have some back soreness at the site of the epidural. This will typically go away in a couple of days. In 1 percent of cases, the epidural may cause a headache. Please let your anesthesiologist know if this occurs.

There is an extremely small risk of neurologic issues, which are usually temporary. Please consult your anesthesiologist if you have further questions.

