Pain Relief During Labor And Delivery

Whether you choose to use medication for pain relief or not, it is useful to prepare yourself for the process of childbirth -- the breathing and relaxation techniques may be very helpful in addition to receiving any pain relief.

Comfort Measures for Labor

There are a variety of comfort measures that can help you to manage through each stage of labor. Not all strategies will be beneficial to every woman, but it is a good idea to become familiar with relaxation tactics that you feel might be calming to you in situations of discomfort and/or anxiety. Some of the more common comfort measures for labor include:

- Walking, rocking, position changes
- Sitting on a birthing ball and swaying
- Peaceful surroundings: dim lights, music
- Relaxing in the shower or bath
- Focusing on your breath or structured breathing patterns
- Massage, counterpressure against lower back
- Heat or cold
- Visualization: “imagine yourself on a beach, letting the waves wash over you”
- Positive encouragement from others
- Presence of a labor companion

Childbirth classes can teach you breathing and relaxation techniques to help you cope with pain experienced during labor and delivery. The amount of pain felt during childbirth is different for every woman. For some women, the techniques learned in the childbirth classes are enough to relieve their pain, and medication is not necessary. For other women, the option of having pain relief medication available to them during labor and delivery is appealing and, when used, may help them experience a more comfortable childbirth. In weighing your options about pain relief during labor and delivery, educate yourself on all the different types available by talking to your OB care provider.

Pain Medications

Some of the first line pain-relieving medicines are those that are injected into your vein or muscle. This medicine acts on your entire nervous system rather than just a certain part of your body. The pain may be dulled, but may not be eliminated completely. These medicines usually do not slow down labor or interfere with contractions, but may cause drowsiness to you and baby. With these medications, some women have an easier time coping with labor and it helps them to feel more relaxed. On the other hand, some women complain of an unnerving feeling of loss of control.
**Epidural Block**

An "epidural block" numbs or causes a loss of feeling in the lower half your body. An anesthesiologist injects the block into the lower back. The injection is made into a small space outside the spinal cord, and a small soft tube (catheter) is inserted into your back. The needle is withdrawn, and the numbing medicine can be given continuously or in small doses through the tube for as long as desired. This lessens the pain of the uterine contractions and the delivery of the baby through the vagina. Usually, low doses are given because it is safer for you and the baby. Once the medicine takes effect (10-20 minutes), you should feel better, but you may still feel some back or rectal pressure during contractions.

While rare, there are some risks associated with epidural blocks:

- Blood pressure may drop temporarily, which might cause the baby's heart rate to slow down. Fluids are given intravenously through a vein to help keep your blood pressure stable. You also may need to lie on your side to help keep your blood circulating, and you may receive medication to bring up your blood pressure.
- If you are very numb, the epidural may make it harder to bear down and push the baby through the birth canal.
- Some women experience a short period of decreased uterine contractions, but many are comfortable and their labor progresses as expected -- or even faster. If labor slows, your caregiver may give medication to speed up your contractions.
- A headache may occur, but this is very rare.
- Medicine could enter the spinal fluid and cause temporary dizziness, difficulty breathing, or a seizure, but this is unusual.
- Shivering may occur, although shivering often occurs during labor even without an epidural.

**The Best Choice**

There is no medical "best choice" for how to manage pain during labor – instead, it’s a question of what makes the most sense for you and your partner. Natural childbirth is a little like running a marathon: it’s an awesome accomplishment, but you can travel the same 26 miles in a car with a lot less effort, and still end up in the same place. If you want to deliver without medication, take a childbirth class, consider yoga or other meditation techniques, and give it your best shot. If all goes well, it’s an incredible experience. But know that you will have a baby regardless of what pain medication you choose, and don’t allow the journey to obscure your ultimate destination.

The key is to become educated on your choices. Remain flexible and open when you are planning for your labor and delivery, because often things change when the actual day arrives. It is important to know that you have NOT failed if you decide to seek pain relief instead of going through it "naturally." Women have different pain thresholds and sometimes the pain is worse than anticipated. Most importantly, your health and that of the baby should always come first.

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