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## Childbirth - pain relief options

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## Summary

- Childbirth is usually a painful experience.
- There is a range of options for pain relief in labour including non-medical techniques and medical pain relief options such as nitrous oxide, pethidine and epidural anaesthesia.
- Particularly if you are having your first baby, consider all options and be flexible.
- If you planned to give birth without using pain relief, but find the labour pains are overwhelming, don't be reluctant to ask the doctor, nurse or midwife for pain relief.

Labour and childbirth is usually a painful experience and women vary in their response to it. Some women are keen to avoid drugs or other medical interventions while others are happy to consider all available options. For a woman having her first baby, the experience of labour (and her reaction to it) is unpredictable.

For this reason, it is a good idea to be aware of the options for pain relief that are available and to know something about the different methods. You may have a plan for how you hope to manage your labour, but it is best to be prepared to be flexible.

## Non-medical pain relief options for childbirth

Research suggests that adequate preparation can help to reduce pain or at least modify the perception of pain and reduce anxiety, which can help you to better cope with labour. There are several non-drug pain relief options:

- Being in good physical condition is important. Exercise gently and regularly throughout your pregnancy, avoid cigarettes and alcohol, and eat a healthy, balanced diet.
- Knowing what to expect during the various stages of labour can help reduce anxiety. Antenatal classes are strongly recommended.
- Breathing techniques may help you to 'ride the waves' of each contraction.
- Constant, close support from your partner (or a trusted friend or loved one) for the duration of labour can reduce anxiety.
- Using distractions like music can help to take your mind off the pain.
- Hot or cold packs, massage, a warm shower or immersion in a warm bath, and keeping active may all be helpful.
- Hypnosis, acupuncture and acupressure are areas in which there has been little research but these may be considered also.

## Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS)

TENS is a technique in which nerves in the lower back are stimulated using a small hand-held device controlled by the woman. It has no known side effects for mother or baby and many women find it helpful either alone or in combination with other methods of pain relief.

## Medical pain relief options for childbirth

The three main medical pain-relieving options for labour include:

- Nitrous oxide
- Pethidine
- Epidural anaesthesia.

### Nitrous oxide

Nitrous oxide, known as 'laughing gas', is mixed with oxygen and administered to the mother through a face mask or a tube held in the mouth. The gas takes a few seconds to work, so it is important to breathe from the mask as soon as a contraction starts.

Nitrous oxide doesn't stop the pain entirely, but takes the 'edge' off the intensity of each contraction. Many women prefer nitrous oxide because it allows them direct control – you can hold the mask yourself and take deep breaths whenever you feel the need.

Nitrous oxide doesn't interfere with contractions and it doesn't linger in either the woman's or the baby's body.

Possible problems with using nitrous oxide include:

- Nausea and vomiting
- Confusion and disorientation
- Claustrophobic sensations from the face mask
- Lack of pain relief – in some cases, nitrous oxide doesn't offer any pain relief at all (this applies to around one-third of women).

### Pethidine

Pethidine is a strong pain reliever (related to morphine and heroin), usually injected directly into a muscle in the buttock. It may also be administered intravenously (directly into a vein). Depending on various factors, the effect of pethidine can last anywhere from two to four hours. Pethidine can make you feel sick, so anti-nausea

medications are usually administered at the same time.

Possible problems with pethidine for the mother include:

- Giddiness and nausea
- Disorientation and altered perception
- Respiratory depression (reduced breathing)
- Lack of pain relief, in some cases.

Possible problems with pethidine for the baby include:

- The unborn baby is exposed to the drug via the umbilical cord and may experience respiratory depression at birth, particularly if several doses are given or the baby delivers soon after a pethidine injection. This effect can be reversed by an injection given to the baby.
- The baby's sucking reflex may also be depressed, as well as other normal reflexes. Debate persists over the effects of pethidine on newborns.

## Epidural anaesthesia

Epidural injections are the most effective pain relief available. They are used for vaginal births and also for caesarean sections, because they allow the mother to stay awake and alert during the baby's birth. Anaesthetic is injected into the lining of the spinal cord through the back, which makes the mother feel numb from the waist down. Your baby's heart rate will be monitored continuously.

Possible side effects and complications of epidural anaesthesia include:

- The anaesthesia may not be complete and you may still experience some pain. This may require the procedure to be repeated.
- After the epidural has been inserted, your blood pressure may drop, causing you to feel faint and nauseated. This may also cause stress to your baby. This is treated by giving intravenous fluid.
- An epidural often causes some muscle weakness in the legs, so women who have had an epidural anaesthetic may be confined to bed.
- The lack of sensation in the lower body means that you will not be able to tell when you need to urinate. A urinary catheter will be inserted in most cases.
- Epidurals can lengthen the second stage of labour.
- The likelihood of having a normal vaginal delivery is reduced.
- If you are unable to push effectively, due to altered sensation and reduced muscle strength, the baby may have to be delivered by forceps or vacuum cup.
- Around one per cent of women experience headache immediately following the procedure.
- Some women experience itchiness after having an epidural. This can usually be effectively treated using antihistamines.
- Some women experience pain or tenderness where the epidural was injected.
- Around one in 550 women experience ongoing patches of numbness on the back near the injection site.
- **Very rare** complications include infection, blood clots and difficulty breathing.

An epidural does not:

- Increase the length of the first stage of labour
- Increase the likelihood of a caesarean section
- Cause long-term backache.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Obstetrician
- Midwife

## Things to remember

- Childbirth is usually a painful experience.
- There is a range of options for pain relief in labour including non-medical techniques and medical pain relief options such as nitrous oxide, pethidine and epidural anaesthesia.
- Particularly if you are having your first baby, consider all options and be flexible.
- If you planned to give birth without using pain relief, but find the labour pains are overwhelming, don't be reluctant to ask the doctor, nurse or midwife for pain relief.

### References

- *Continuous support for women during childbirth, 2007*, Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, Issue 2. [More information here.](#)
- *Using water for pain relief during labour, 2007*, The Royal Women's Hospital, Melbourne. [More information here.](#)
- *Epidural information, 2013*, The Royal Women's Hospital, Melbourne. [More information here.](#)
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- *Epidural anaesthesia – side effects, 2011*, NHS Choices, UK. [More information here.](#)
- *Epidural anaesthesia*, NHS, UK. [More information here.](#)

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- [Pregnancy - unplanned](#)  
[When a woman does not want to become a parent, her pregnancy options may include abortion or adoption...](#)
- [Contraception - emergency contraception](#)  
[It is best to take emergency contraception as soon as possible, ideally within 24 hours of having unprotected sex, but it still works well within 96 hours \(four days\)...](#)

### **Stages of pregnancy**

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[Pregnancy is calculated from the first day of your last period, not from the date of conception...](#)
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[All women experience pregnancy differently, and you will experience different symptoms at different stages of your pregnancy...](#)
- [Planning for labour and birth](#)  
[Some of the signs and symptoms of going into labour may include period-like cramps, backache, diarrhoea and contractions...](#)
- [Conceiving a baby](#)  
[The odds of a young fertile couple conceiving by having sexual intercourse around the time of ovulation \(the release of the egg from the ovary\) are approximately one in five every month. Around nine...](#)
- [Pregnancy stages and changes](#)  
[It's helpful to have an idea of how your body may react to the different stages of pregnancy. It also helps to know how pregnancy may affect your emotions and feelings...](#)

### **Fertility issues and options**

- [Adoption](#)

[Adoption can give a secure family life to children who can't live with their birth family...](#)

- [Surrogacy](#)

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- [If you want to get pregnant, timing is everything](#)

[If you are trying for a baby, to increase your chances of conceiving, it helps to know when you are at your most fertile, and when is the best time to have sex...](#)

- [Abortion](#)

[All women should have access to accurate information about abortion so they can make their own informed decisions...](#)

- [Age and fertility](#)

[Age affects the fertility of both men and women, and is the single biggest factor affecting a woman's chance to conceive and have a healthy baby...](#)

- [Infertility in men](#)

[A couple isn't suspected of fertility problems until they have tried and failed to conceive for one year...](#)

- [Infertility in women](#)

[The odds of a young fertile couple conceiving by having sexual intercourse around the time of ovulation are approximately one in five every month...](#)

- [Weight, fertility and pregnancy health](#)

[Compared with women in the healthy weight range, women who are carrying extra weight are less likely to conceive...](#)

### **Keeping healthy during pregnancy**

- [Pregnancy - morning sickness](#)

[Morning sickness is typically at its worst early in the day but it can strike at any point during the day or night...](#)

- [Postnatal exercise - sample workout](#)

[Make sure your abdominal muscles have healed before you do any vigorous tummy exercises, such as crunches...](#)

- [Healthy eating during pregnancy - tucker talk tips](#)

[Some foods should be avoided during pregnancy as they carry bacteria that could harm your unborn baby...](#)

- [Postnatal exercise](#)

[Always consult with your doctor or midwife before starting any postnatal exercise program...](#)

- [Pregnancy and your mental health](#)

[Finding out you are pregnant can be a very exciting time. But it can also make you feel uncomfortable, unwell, worried and make you wonder how you are going to cope. And it doesn't stop when the baby...](#)

- [Pregnancy and teeth](#)

[It's important to look after your teeth and gums when you're pregnant, as gum disease can affect your baby...](#)

- [Tests, scans and checks - pregnancy and labour](#)

[Tests can confirm your pregnancy and also monitor your baby's development in the womb...](#)

- [Alcohol and pregnancy](#)

[There's no safe level of alcohol use during pregnancy. It's safest to not drink at all during pregnancy, when trying to conceive, and while breastfeeding...](#)

- [Pregnancy and smoking](#)

[Smoking while pregnant exposes a woman and her unborn child to an increased risk of health problems...](#)

- [Immunisation and pregnancy](#)

[Immunisation can protect a woman and her unborn baby against many infectious diseases...](#)

- [Folate for pregnant women](#)

[Even women who aren't planning to have a baby should increase their folate intake in case of unplanned pregnancy...](#)

- [Pregnancy and exercise](#)

[Unless you have complications, you should be able to exercise throughout your pregnancy...](#)

- [Pelvic floor](#)

[Pelvic floor exercises are designed to improve muscle tone and prevent the need for corrective surgery...](#)

- [Pregnancy and diet](#)

[Good nutrition during pregnancy can help to keep you and your developing baby healthy...](#)

- [Pregnancy and travel](#)

[Travelling to developing nations is not encouraged during pregnancy, due to the risk of disease and the standard of medical facilities...](#)

### Health concerns during pregnancy

- [Miscarriage and Stillbirth - Coming to terms \(video\)](#)

- [Pregnancy - bleeding problems](#)

[Bleeding from the vagina in early pregnancy happens in almost one in four pregnancies...](#)

- [Newborn bloodspot screening \(video\)](#)

[Every newborn baby in Australia is offered a newborn bloodspot screening test to identify those at risk for rare, but serious, medical conditions including PKU, hypothyroidism and cystic fibrosis...](#)

- [Placenta previa](#)

[Placenta previa means the placenta has implanted at the bottom of the uterus, over the cervix or close by...](#)

- [Placental abruption](#)

[Placental abruption means the placenta has detached from the wall of the uterus, starving the baby of oxygen and nutrients...](#)

- [Pregnancy - pre-eclampsia](#)

[There is no evidence that pre-eclampsia is caused by emotional stress, working too hard or not getting enough rest...](#)

- [Lupus and pregnancy](#)

[Lupus can be controlled with medications, so the majority of affected women are able to have children...](#)

- [HIV and women – having children](#)

[Women living with human immunodeficiency virus \(HIV\), or women whose partner is HIV-positive, may wish to have children but feel concerned about the risk of transmission of the virus to themselves \(if...](#)

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- [Postnatal depression \(PND\)](#)

[Postnatal depression can happen either a few days or weeks after the birth, with a slow or sudden onset...](#)

- [Molar pregnancy](#)

[Most molar pregnancies are diagnosed when bleeding early in pregnancy prompts an ultrasound scan...](#)

- [Miscarriage](#)

[A range of feelings is normal after a miscarriage, and they often linger for some time...](#)

- [Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder \(FASD\)](#)

[The World Health Organization recommends that pregnant women should avoid alcohol...](#)

- [Asthma - pregnancy and breastfeeding](#)

[Pregnant women with asthma need to continue to take their asthma medication as it is important to the health of both mother and baby that the mother's asthma is well managed...](#)

- [Pregnancy and diet](#)

[Good nutrition during pregnancy can help to keep you and your developing baby healthy...](#)

- [Birth defects explained](#)

[The cause of birth defects is often unknown, speak to your GP if you are at increased risk of having a baby with a congenital anomaly...](#)

- [Ectopic pregnancy](#)



[Ectopic pregnancy is caused by a fertilised egg not being able to move through the fallopian tube...](#)

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[Gestational diabetes is diabetes that occurs during pregnancy and usually disappears when the pregnancy is over...](#)

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[Melissa shares her story of how her baby caught chickenpox at 5 weeks old...](#)

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