

## Epidurals – Is Pain a Good Thing?

It seems there are few things that are as polarizing as labor. I know, I know, labor shouldn't be a polarizing issue because it's a natural process and we should just leave well enough alone – right?! I agree there are many times health care providers add things to the labor process that are not always necessary, but the oft public opinion is that we are doing so because as providers we are too much into the technology of birth and not the natural process of labor.



To the contrary I know many obstetricians that are fans of natural childbirth. I am more of a proponent of a woman's choice, and one of the choices that many women make during labor is what to do for pain control. If you were to ask most women who've never been in labor what they'd do for pain control, most of them would probably say that they would prefer no pain medication. By the time active labor sets in and the reality of the pain takes hold, many of these laboring women have changed their minds because the pain is too intense.

Are we coddling these women by asking them if they would like an epidural? Aren't epidurals bad things that prolong labor and increase the rates of caesarean section? Don't epidurals interfere with the bonding between mothers and their babies? What do you think?

I wanted to address some of the myths and some of the realities about epidurals and in the long run, remember it's your decision and only you know what it feels like to be in labor!

**1. Is it true that epidurals increase the caesarean section rate?** Well, there are many things that increase the rates of caesarean section and the epidural may be a small part of that but it's not a causal relationship. The majority of women who have an epidural do not then go on to have a caesarean section. The problem with the argument that it increases the caesarean section rate is the question; would these women have had a caesarean section if they'd not had the epidural? This question is almost impossible to answer. The reason that an epidural potentially increases the risk of caesarean is because they do have a propensity to slow the labor process.

The reason for this process is not directly known, but it has been documented and this can be cause for the starting of pitocin and other forms of active management of labor. Many advocates of the natural birthing process claim that once you receive an epidural you are opening a Pandora's Box and potentially sliding down that slippery slope towards a caesarean section.

**2. Epidurals will decrease my blood pressure.** This is true in some cases. Because the epidural decreases sympathetic tone it can cause the blood vessels to relax just like the muscles, this could result in a drop in blood pressure and a subsequent change in the foetal heart rate. If this happens the anaesthesiologist will administer IV fluid or medications to increase blood pressure.

**3. I will not be able to move if I get an epidural.** Some patients have a very difficult time moving when they undergo an epidural, but in many cases you will be able to move your legs. When you go to the dentist and have your lip numbed you can still talk, albeit not as well, but you can usually still speak and this is because you recruit the surrounding muscles to help. This is also the case with movement of the legs.

**4. I won't bond with my baby if I don't feel the pain.** My wife had two caesarean sections and she has one of the strongest bonds with our children that I've seen. I would challenge this statement until my last breath. The bonding experience is much more multifactorial than just the evidence of pain during labor.

Hope this information helps in making a more informed decision about whether an epidural in part of your birth process – Shawn.

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