

Having an epidural

What is an epidural?

An epidural injection is one method that is used to provide pain relief. An epidural is an injection into an area of your back that surrounds the spinal cord and spinal nerves. Local anaesthetic and steroid will be injected. This will bathe the nerve roots and intervertebral discs which may have an effect on your pain. Epidural injections can be given anywhere along the length of your spine. This may be your neck, thorax, lower back or sacrum (bottom of spine).

What happens before your procedure?

When you arrive for your epidural both a nurse and a doctor will see you.

The doctor will explain the procedure to you and will give you the opportunity to ask any questions. If you agree to proceed you will be asked to sign a consent form if you haven't already done so in the clinic. You will then be asked to change into a theatre gown.

What happens during the procedure?

A nurse takes you from day surgery to the operating theatre where the injection is performed. A team member will insert a small needle into a vein on the back of your hand, which can be used to give pain killers or drugs to relax you if necessary. You will probably be awake throughout, as the doctor may need to ask you questions about your sensations.

You may be asked to lie on your stomach.

An x-ray machine is used to help the doctor locate the epidural space. Once the doctor has found the space, s/he will inject the area around the nerve with a mixture of local anaesthetic and steroid. You may feel a pushing sensation or some discomfort.

Does the procedure have any side effects?

The steroids should have very little effect on the rest of the body. However:

- People who have diabetes may find that their blood sugars become worse for a few days.
- Some women experience facial flushing lasting a few days and menstrual periods can become heavier for a month or two.
- Very occasionally the anaesthetic enters one of the nerves, causing numbness in the legs. This normally wears off after around four hours. However, if this happens you may be required to stay in the hospital until normal feeling has returned.
- About one person in 100 may experience a bad headache for a few days afterwards.

Other side -effects are extremely rare and the doctor will discuss these with you before having the procedure.

You should not have this procedure with x-rays if you are pregnant. Please tell the doctor if there is any possibility of this.

You should not have this procedure if you are taking any medicine that thins your blood, such as high dose aspirin, clopidogrel, dabigatran or rivaroxaban and/or warfarin. Please tell your doctor before your admission, so that these can be stopped for a while.

Will the pain go away?

Once the local anaesthetic has worn off your pain may return. It can take up to three weeks for the steroid to take effect. However if the local anaesthetic has worked well there is a good chance that the steroid will work well too.

Possible alternatives to this treatment

The doctor will discuss the most appropriate treatments for you during your out-patient appointment.

Going home

It would be advisable to arrange for a family member or friend to take you home by car following this procedure (not public transport). We would advise you to arrange a quiet day for the day after your injection.

Do not drive for at least 24 hours after your injection.

Do you have any further questions?

Please contact the pain nurses on 0207 794 0500 x 31912 and leave a message on the answerphone. Someone will aim to call you back in 24 to 48 hours.

If you would like this information in an alternative format, please ask a member of staff.