

## About epidurals

This booklet provides general information about epidural pain relief. If you have any questions, please contact the **Pain management service**.

### **Pain after surgery**

Pain is usually a warning sign that something is wrong. Although pain after surgery is normal, if left untreated it can delay your recovery. For example, being able to cough, breathe deeply and move in comfort is very important to your recovery.

### **What is an epidural?**

An epidural can give good pain relief after different types of surgery. An epidural is a drip containing a pain-relieving drug. This drip is given through a fine tube into your epidural space, which is a space found in your spine. The pain-relieving drug numbs the nerves in the epidural space. It is these nerves that carry pain messages around your body.

### **How is the epidural put in place?**

Most patients' epidurals are put in place before surgery, while you are still awake. A local anaesthetic is injected into a small area of skin in your back. This makes the area numb. Then a fine tube is inserted through a needle. The needle is removed and the fine tube is taped to your back. This is connected to a pump that delivers pain-relieving drugs.

### **How does an epidural work?**

A fine tube is inserted and taped to your back, which is connected to a pump. This pump delivers pain-relieving drugs into your epidural space. This numbs the area where you will have your operation.

### **Will I be able to feel the epidural?**

No. Once the epidural has been put in most patients do not feel it. Some patients feel the tape that is keeping the epidural in place, but this does not hurt. If you get any pain in your back, please tell a nurse/doctor.

**Will I be able to move?**

Yes. Sometimes the medicine in the epidural can cause numbness in the legs. It is important that you ask a nurse to help you stand and walk. If you do have numbness, we can change things to make it better. Any numbness will wear off once the epidural is stopped.

**What are the side-effects?**

As with all drugs the medicine used in epidurals can cause unwanted effects. We cannot predict who will be affected.

They can cause:

- weak and heavy legs
- dizziness
- drowsiness
- low blood pressure – this can happen after your operation even if you did not have an epidural
- difficulty in passing urine
- nausea and sickness
- itchiness

None of these side-effects are serious or cause long term harm. If you are affected, in any of these ways, do tell a nurse or a doctor. We can give you medicine to help them.

**What will the nurses do while I am on the epidural?**

The nurse will:

- take your pulse and blood pressure regularly
- ask you about your pain
- make changes to your epidural, if you are in pain or experiencing side-effects
- treat any side-effects you may have
- encourage you to move and deep breathe
- test how your epidural is working with some ice / cold spray

**What if the epidural doesn't work?**

Some patients still have pain using the epidural. It is important that you tell a nurse/doctor who can give you

more of the pain-relieving drugs. At times your nurse/doctor may ask for advice from an anaesthetist or nurse who is a specialist in pain who will come and help relieve your pain. We can give you milder painkillers by mouth or suppository, at the same time as the epidural.

### **Are there any alternatives?**

Yes. If you do not want to use an epidural there are other ways of controlling your pain. Your anaesthetist will be able to give you information on managing your pain after your operation. They will help you make your decision in choosing the best way to manage your pain. For example it is possible:

- to stop the epidural and have regular tablets or suppositories for pain
- to have pain relief injections
- to start PCA (patient-controlled analgesia) - please ask the nurse/doctor for a leaflet.

The pain management team (nurses and doctors who are expert in controlling pain) will come and see you while you are on the epidural. If you want to speak to them at any time, ask your nurse to contact them.

### **For further information contact:**

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Pond Street, London NW3 2QG

**Tel: 020 7794 0500**