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Epidurals in labour: Is the birth shorter if the epidural is stopped late in labour?



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Epidurals are a popular choice for pain relief in childbirth. You can read more about epidurals in our Fact Sheet (URL: <http://www.informedhealthonline.org/index.189.en.html>) . Epidurals relieve pain effectively (URL: <http://www.informedhealthonline.org/index.184.en.html>) , but one of the disadvantages is that some women lose the urge to push. This can lengthen the second or pushing stage of labour, which can increase the risk of needing a so-called 'instrumental delivery' or assisted birth. That means a birth where forceps or a vacuum extractor is used to help with the baby's birth. Some hospitals let the epidural end late in the labour, in the hope that this might mean the woman can give birth without extra medical help.

Researchers from the Cochrane Collaboration studied the impact of ending an epidural earlier. They looked at trials that compared having an epidural to the end, or stopping it early. There were not a lot of trials: altogether, only around 460 women were studied.

These small numbers meant that the Cochrane authors remained cautious in their conclusions. They concluded that the trials do not provide evidence that stopping an epidural early shortens the birth. There was no important difference in the rate of assisted birth or caesarean section when the epidural was stopped early.

One definite difference was in the amount of pain. After the epidural ended more women found that their pain relief was inadequate. They were not asked, though, how they felt about the birth or their care. So we do not know which practice women would prefer.

Glossary

Cochrane Collaboration

The Cochrane Collaboration is an international network of thousands of researchers and others. They work together in teams called Cochrane Review Groups to answer questions about health care by doing systematic reviews of evidence. To achieve this, the members of the Collaboration have developed systems and methods for systematically finding and analysing the results of trials of health care interventions. The goal of the Cochrane Collaboration is to help patients, health care practitioners and others make more informed decisions about health care. You can read more about the Cochrane Collaboration at their website.

evidence

Evidence is what we call scientific proof from well-conducted, good-quality scientific trials that have been carefully designed to answer specific questions. Depending on the types of questions, different scientific research methods (types of study) are most appropriate to find reliable answers to these questions. Randomized controlled trials (RCTs), for example, are the best way to get reliable evidence on the effectiveness of medical treatments (interventions). This type of study, however, is not the best form of evidence for all possible questions, and does not provide the best answers to all kinds of questions, either. Epidemiological studies, for example, are very suitable for establishing well-founded proof for the spreading of a disease in the population.

Sources

Torvaldsen S, Roberts CL, Bell JC, Raynes-Greenow CH. Discontinuation of epidural analgesia late in labour for reducing the adverse delivery outcomes associated with epidural analgesia. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, Issue 4 of 2004. (Cochrane Database) (URL: <http://www.mrw.interscience.wiley.com/cochrane/clsysrev/articles/CD004457/frame.html>)

The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG)

The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG) was established by legislation to provide evaluations of the effectiveness, quality and efficiency of healthcare services. This includes the assessment of medicines as well as the publication of health information for consumers and patients.

Evidence basis of our health information

Our information is based primarily on systematic reviews of the effects of health care. Systematic reviews are necessary to gain an objective picture of health care. In order to do this, a clear question is formulated. Researchers then find all the relevant studies that could answer this question. They then evaluate those studies.

You can find a list of the evidence and other scientific literature on which this information is based at [**www.informedhealthonline.org**](http://www.informedhealthonline.org)

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