



Epidural Analgesia



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Analgesics are medications that help relieve pain. An epidural anesthesia is an injection given on your back to reduce the pain in a specific part of your body. During the process of labour and childbirth, pain control is essential for the safety and comfort of the mother and fetus. Among analgesics that are given at this time, epidural analgesia is most used. This article will highlight the purpose, benefits, care to be taken, and complications of epidural analgesia.

Definition

Epidural analgesia is so-called because it is delivered into the epidural space (space outside the spinal cord) via a catheter (small tube). This catheter can be used to administer anesthetics or opioids.

Purpose

- During labour, childbirth, and caesarean section, epidural analgesia can be used as a pain control measure.
- They may be used for controlling pain during or after certain surgeries.
- In addition to epidural analgesia, sometimes steroid medications may be given through this route to treat back or leg pain caused by slipped disc or sciatica.



Benefits of epidural analgesia

- Provides better pain control compared to intravenously given narcotics
- Because of better pain control, breathing is easier
- Lesser nausea
- Enables quicker recovery and thus helps in early physical mobility
- It is safer to use when compared to opioids because it results in reduced neonatal depression
- It has lesser effects on the fetus
- Epidural analgesia is associated with fewer side effects for the mother

Preparation

Before one gets an epidural analgesia, there are certain things that should be taken care of:

- Clear any doubts that you may have about epidural analgesia.
- Inform your doctor about the medications that you may be taking, if any.
- After the epidural, have someone ready to take you home as you may be unable to drive for 24 hours after the epidural.

Procedure

Usually, an anesthetist administers epidural analgesia. The following points highlight the procedure and the requirements which should be remembered at the time of the procedure:

- Epidural is performed while one is awake and conscious.
- The optimum position for the epidural is with knees bent towards your chest while lying down, or leaning forwards while sitting down.
- Before the epidural, an anesthetic agent will be given to numb the area of insertion of the epidural.
- An epidural catheter is then inserted into the back (spine), adjacent to the nerves carrying pain messages to the brain.
- Depending on which part needs to be numbed or relieved of pain, the epidural insertion can be performed at varying levels of the spine.
- Once the epidural catheter is inserted, pain-relieving medications or anesthetics can be provided. This can result in numbness of the chest, stomach, and legs.
- On certain occasions, the catheter remains in the position to administer pain medication either manually or through a pump.
- Depending on the procedure, the time for which the catheter remains inside varies. It may stay for a few hours in case of childbirth; however, in major surgeries, it may remain inserted for a few days.
- During labour, mobile epidurals may be used, which use low doses of the pain medicine and allow the mother to mobilize.

Recovery

The following points need to be remembered after an epidural:

- After an epidural, the numbness lasts for a few hours, after which it subsides.
- One will be advised to rest till the numbness subsides. During this time, one may experience a slight tingling feeling in the skin.
- If one experiences pain, medicines to control the pain can be administered by the doctor or nurse.
- After an epidural, avoid drinking alcohol or operating heavy machinery for 24 hours.

Complications

- Blood pressure may decrease. This can be treated with intravenously administered fluids.
- Soreness or pain at the point of insertion of the catheter may occur in certain individuals. This back pain will not last for very long.
- Because of the leakage of spinal fluid, headache may occur. IV fluids, oral analgesics, or caffeine can help reduce headaches.
- Depending on the level of the epidural analgesia, weakness may occur in the legs.
- Brief bladder control loss may occur.
- Itchiness of skin may occur.

Compared to other labour pain-relieving methods, epidural analgesia is the safest and most effective.

It is advantageous because it does not impede labour progress, prevents newborn respiratory depression, and is safe for the mother.



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