

Pain Relief for Labour and Birth 271009

Introduction

Knowing about the types of pain relief available to you will help you make informed choices about what is right for you and your baby through labour and birth. You should write these down in your Birth Plan so the midwife looking after you knows what your preferences are.

Your midwife will also be able to inform, advise and discuss with you the options available.

Early Labour

When your labour starts you may experience backache and strong period-like pains. Using breathing, keeping mobile, having your lower back massaged or relaxing in a warm bath may help you. Having a supportive birth partner can really help too. When you feel your contractions are becoming stronger and closer together you should telephone the Labour Ward, Malden Suite or the Community Midwife if you are planning a home birth.

Telephone Numbers

Labour Ward:
020 8546 0584

Malden Suite:
020 8546 7711 ext **6384**

Community Midwives:
020 8546 7711 ext **3863**

You may find these methods alone are all you need throughout your labour and birth of your baby. Every woman experiences pain in a different way and not all labours are the same, so some women may choose different types of pain relief through the different stages of their labour.

Either at home or when you come into hospital your midwife will look at your Birth Plan and discuss with you the most appropriate pain relief for you, taking into account how far you are in labour and your preferences.

Pain Relief Choices

Water

In early labour you may find a warm bath relaxing and it can help with any backache you might have. If there are no complications with you or your baby once your labour is progressing you may want to consider using one of the birthing pools available on the Malden Suite.

Benefits

- Relaxing, soothing and peaceful
- Supports you in a 'weightless' environment
- Less likely to need pethidine or an epidural
- You can use Entonox when in the water

Disadvantages

- You will need to come out of the pool if you require pain relief apart from Entonox
- If there is an emergency you will need to come out as quickly as possible
- Can only be used once your labour has established, for example if you are dilated 4 cm or more.

TENS (Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation)

A TENS machine delivers gentle electric currents via electrodes that are attached to pads on your back. When it is turned on it creates a tingling feeling which you can control the intensity of as your labour progresses.

It works by stimulating the release of your natural pain killers and blocking nerve impulses to your womb. Ask your midwife where you can hire one of these machines.

TENS works well from the very early stages of labour so it is advisable to have one on loan from about 37 weeks, ready and waiting. They are not complicated to use but it is advisable you read the instructions ready for use as it is important to place the pads and electrodes in the correct place to ensure it works well.

Benefits

- It does not restrict your movements
- The intensity is controlled by you
- No effects on the baby
- Can be used from early on in labour until your baby is born

Disadvantages

- You may need further pain relief
- Not everyone likes the sensation of the electrodes
- Cannot use if you want to go into the water

Entonox

Entonox is also known as 'gas and air' and is breathed in through a mouthpiece. For it to be most effective you need to start using it as soon as a contraction starts then stop when the contraction does to let the effects wear off.

Women find it very useful to use with their TENS and finds it helps focus their breathing throughout a contractions.

Benefits

- Quick acting and simple to use
- You control how much you take in
- Can control your breathing
- You can use it throughout your labour
- No harmful effects on the baby
- You can use it in the birthing pool

Disadvantages

- Can make you feel nauseous and drowsy
- May make your mouth dry
- Does not take the pain away completely

Pethidine

This is a pain relieving drug given by injection into your thigh muscle.

Benefits

- Gives pain relief for a couple of hours
- Can be used with Entonox
- Has a relaxing effect
- Can be used both in the early and first stages of labour
- You can have 2-3 doses throughout your labour

Disadvantages

- Can make you drowsy
- Can make you nauseous but you will be given another drug at the same time to prevent this
- It crosses the placenta and can make the baby sleepy, can be reluctant to feed for the first few hours.
- For this reason it is not given in the later stages of labour
- Can make some women feel less in control

Epidural

An epidural is the injection of local anaesthetic into the epidural space in your back which in turn will block the pain impulses created by your contractions.

An epidural is inserted by a specially trained anaesthetist who places a tiny tube into your back and then gives a local anaesthetic through it. The tube stays in your back throughout your labour so more doses of anaesthetic can be given to ensure you are pain free.

Epidural anaesthesia works by blocking pain impulses to your womb, they are usually very effective in controlling the pain.

At Kingston Hospital we offer low dose epidurals.

Benefits

- Usually takes all the pain away
- 'Mobile' or low dose epidurals allow you to move around in labour
- You can relax and possibly sleep on and off

Disadvantages

- They can restrict your movements as the more doses you have the heavier your legs will feel
- You may need a catheter into your bladder as you may not feel the sensation to pass urine
- Your baby's heart beat will need to be monitored continuously

- It may slow your labour down which means you will need a drip to help your contractions become stronger
- You have a slightly higher chance of needing a ventouse or forceps delivery if you find pushing difficult or cannot feel to push
- There is a very small risk of headache and/or nerve damage but the anaesthetist will talk you through these before you agree to having an epidural

Spinal Anaesthetic

A quick acting single injection of local anaesthetic into the fluid that surrounds the nerves in your spine.

They are usually used for Elective Caesarean Sections, or for procedures following the birth where you may require stronger pain relief than what you have had in labour.

The effects are the same as an epidural although you will be much more numb. The effects wear off after a couple of hours.

General Anaesthetic (GA)

Having a general anaesthetic is not advisable unless specifically recommended by the doctors as it has potential complications for you and the baby.

It is usually reserved for emergency situations where there is not enough time to have a spinal anaesthetic or if there are specific medical factors to consider that would put you more at risk of epidural anaesthetic than general anaesthetic.

An oxygen mask is placed over your face and an injection of drugs is given into a vein to put you to sleep. Once asleep a tube is passed into your windpipe and anaesthetic gases are given to keep you asleep through the procedure. Afterwards you will feel disorientated and drowsy for a while.

Alternative Methods

Some women choose alternative methods such as aromatherapy, homeopathy, hypnosis, hypnobirthing, acupuncture.

If you would like to use any of these methods please discuss this with your midwife during your antenatal appointments. Currently no midwives offer this service at Kingston Hospital but we are more than happy to support you when using them in labour.

And Finally

It is important to learn about the different choices of pain relief available and how your birth partner can help you in labour.

Many women find it useful to attend antenatal classes with their birth partner to learn about labour, it may be less daunting having some knowledge beforehand.

Learning how to relax and have confidence in your own body can relieve anxiety and ultimately help you deal with labour contractions. Remember your midwife is there to discuss any preferences or concerns so please don't hesitate to ask questions. Above all try to keep an open mind and look forward to meeting your baby!