

Epidural Pain Management

What is epidural pain management?

Epidural pain management is the continuous infusion of medication(s) into the space surrounding the spinal cord called the epidural space. This treatment method is used to eliminate pain during and after certain procedures or surgery. An anesthesiologist (MD) will insert a very small and narrow tube, called a catheter, through the skin of the back until it enters the epidural space. This is a sterile procedure that involves little or no discomfort for the patient. Pain medication and numbing medication are infused into the epidural space. The medication then diffuses (or passes) into the fluid surrounding the spinal cord. This blocks painful sensations and prevents them from reaching the brain. As a result, the individual does not feel pain. Depending on the medications given, patients may experience some temporary numbness and may require some assistance with movement to ensure safety. Careful monitoring is done during the procedure. Fluids are given through an intravenous line (IV) to prevent dehydration and low blood pressure.

What are the advantages of epidural pain management?

Epidural pain management is one of the most effective options available. The epidural method requires less medication to achieve pain relief. As a result the patient experiences fewer side effects than with pain medications given orally, through an IV or injected. Because of improved pain control with less sedation, the recovery period is shortened. Patients are generally able to move, cough, and deep breathe easier and participate in activities that promote recovery.

What happens after the epidural is discontinued?

After an epidural infusion is discontinued the catheter is removed. Numbness usually goes away within a few hours. A band aid dressing is placed over the area on the back where the catheter was inserted and is left on for at least 24 hours. The patient may be given oral medications for continued pain control.

What are the potential side effects of an epidural?

Although problems and side effects are very rare with epidural infusions they may include nausea, urinary retention, itching or headache. When present, side effects usually go away within 24 hours. Be sure your surgeon is aware of all medications, herbals and other preparations that you are taking before surgery. Some medications and herbals cause side effects and may need to be discontinued before surgery (See *GH Perioperative Herbal Alert* and *GH Medications to Avoid Prior to Surgery* patient education handouts).

References: <http://health.discovery.com/diseasesandcond/encyclopedia/2949.html>; <http://www.pain.com>

For more Patient Education Fact Sheets, see the Greenwich Hospital web site at www.greenhosp.org and click on Patients & Visitors, then Patient Education Rev. 8/04