



Your important health information

Headache after a spinal or epidural injection

Many people have an epidural or spinal injection for surgery or childbirth. Occasionally, a certain type of headache can develop after an epidural or spinal injection. This is called a post dural puncture headache (PDPH).

This leaflet explains the symptoms, the cause and the treatment of this type of headache.

What is special about the headache?

Headaches after surgery or childbirth are very common. A post dural puncture headache is an unusual and specific kind of severe headache. It can only happen after an epidural or spinal injection. The headache can be felt at the front or the back of the head. It is worse when sitting or standing and it gets better when lying down flat. There may also be neck pain, nausea and a dislike of bright lights.

Some patients describe it as like a very bad migraine, which is made worse when sitting or standing up.

It is most likely to start between one day and one week after the spinal or epidural injection. Young patients and women having a spinal or epidural injection for childbirth are more likely than other people to have this type of headache.

How likely is it?

The risk of getting a post dural puncture headache after an epidural or spinal injection is between 1 in 100 and 1 in 500.

What causes the headache?

Your brain and spinal cord are contained in a bag of fluid. The bag is called the dura and the fluid is called the cerebrospinal fluid (CSF).

For an epidural, a needle is used to inject local anaesthetic just outside the dura. Occasionally the needle passes through the dura and a small hole is made. CSF can then leak out through this hole.

When a spinal injection is given, a very fine needle is inserted through the dura deliberately. Although the hole made by a spinal needle is very small, in some people this can still lead to a leak of CSF.

If too much fluid leaks out through this hole, the pressure around the brain becomes too low. This causes the typical headache. If you sit up the pressure around your brain becomes even lower. This lowered pressure makes the headache worse.

What can be done about the headache?

Regular pain relieving medicines will be prescribed for you.

You should avoid heavy lifting and straining. Lying flat may help.

What are my choices if the headache persists?

Most headaches will get better in less than a week. In some cases the hole in the dura will take some weeks to seal over. It is not usually a good idea to wait more than a week for this to happen.

Rarely, more serious problems can occur due to the leaking fluid. Your anaesthetist can explain more about this.

A post dural puncture headache is therefore frequently treated with an **epidural blood patch**.

What is an epidural blood patch?

Some of your own blood is injected into your back. The aim is that the blood seals the hole in the dura and stops the leak of fluid.

Great care is taken to clean your arm and take blood in a sterile (clean) manner. This reduces the risk of infection. Blood is carefully injected into your back using an epidural needle, near to the hole in the dura.

The blood will clot and seal the hole that has been made in the dura. The fluid leak is therefore stopped. The pressure around the brain will increase and the headache should improve.

There is often some back pain during the blood patch injection and for a short time afterwards.

The procedure takes about half an hour.

After a blood patch, it is best if you lie flat in bed for at least 6 hours.

During the following two weeks you should not strain or carry anything heavier than your baby. This is to help prevent the blood patch from moving.

You may need someone at home to help you.

What if I still have a headache?

The blood patch will alleviate the headache in 60-70% of people, within 24 hours. If the headache is still there, or if it returns, you may need to have another blood patch. Your anaesthetist will discuss this with you.

What are the risks of a blood patch?

A blood patch may cause local bruising on the back where the injection has been done.

A blood patch can sometimes cause backache and stiffness, which can last a few days.

Epidurals and blood patches do not cause long-term backache.

There is a small chance that another hole in the dura could be made when the blood patch injection is done.

Nerve damage, infection or bleeding into the back happen very rarely after epidurals, spinals and blood patches.

The following are not normal after a blood patch:

- having trouble passing urine
- severe back pain
- numbness in your back or legs.

These problems do not happen often. If they do, you should contact the Anaesthetic Department at your treating hospital, straight away.

Other causes of severe headache after childbirth

There are other causes for severe headache after having a baby. Some of these headaches are very serious and need emergency treatment.

If you have a headache with drowsiness, confusion or vomiting, this is a medical emergency.

Please contact your GP or hospital immediately, or call the emergency services.

The Acute Pain Service nurse will telephone you at home on the day after your blood patch.

If you still have a headache when you leave hospital you will be phoned daily.

Further Information:

If you have any questions about your headache or treatment please telephone:

Mercy Hospital for Women

Phone: 03 8458 4444
Ask for the Emergency Anaesthetic Doctor
on extension 4118

They are available 24hours a day

Werribee Mercy Hospital

Monday to Friday 8.00am to 4:30pm
Phone: 03 8754 6325

Outside office hours

Duty anaesthetist on 03 8754 3026

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