



# Your guide to pain relief in labour

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my expert  
midwife.

Helping you feel like you again

There are many types of pain relief available to use during labour.

Here is your guide to help you understand the difference between non-pharmacological and pharmacological pain relief, so you can make the right choices for yourself when you're in labour.



# Non-pharmacological pain relief

Non-pharmacological pain relief is about using effective methods to help ease pain which are not medicine based. These methods can be very useful during the latent phase/early labour but can also be used throughout labour.

## Water - bath, shower, birth pool

Most hospitals and birth centres are now equipped with water pools specifically designed for use by women in labour. Water has a strong research base behind it to suggest that it is effective not only to help relieve labour pain, but also in helping to shorten of labour, as well as helping to reduce the incidence of tearing during your baby's birth. Some women find a soak in the bath relaxing or a powerful shower can help relieve aches and pains in early labour too. Experiment at the time to see what works best for you.



## Benefits:

- > Water is known to provide effective pain relief for contractions and is also known for its relaxing and therapeutic qualities generally.
- > Water can be very relaxing during labour and in some studies has even been shown to have the ability to lower your blood pressure.
- > It can shorten both the 1st and 2nd stages of labour, making labour a quicker, more efficient process.
- > It has been proven that you reduce the risk of tearing during the birth by using water in labour.
- > You may feel much more able to move around and use active birth positions within the water pool, as it supports your body's weight better than being on dry land.
- > Women often feel they have more privacy and control as there is some 'distance' between themselves and their midwives/others when they are in the pool.
- > Women feel more able to zone out due to the relaxing qualities of water and this can help increase the hormone oxytocin, which in turn can help labour to progress more quickly.



## What other pain relief can I use with water pools?

You may feel that the water works so well that you don't need stronger pain relief, however you can also use paracetamol, dihydrocodeine and gas and air whilst in the pool too. If you have had pethidine or diamorphine you will probably be advised to wait a while before entering the pool as these can make you drowsy.

## More information about waterbirth and pools

- > There are quite a few different types of pools available to use. The water pools in hospitals and birth centres can be various shapes and sizes and are usually made of rigid plastic, so they can be maintained and cleaned easily.
- > There are also the moveable type which are used for labour and births at home. They are mostly inflatable, and come with all the necessary kit, such as a hose, pump and liner, that you will need. These pools can be bought, hired or sometimes loaned to you for a donation - check what is available in your local area or ask at your local homebirth support group, which you can search for online or on social media.

> Not all, but most hospitals have water pools available in their labour wards. Waterbirth rates are higher at maternity units who have midwives experienced in active and normal birth practices, or at birth centres, its worth asking your midwife on the options at your maternity unit as you prepare your birth plan.

> You may decide to use the water pool during labour, or you may decide to give birth in there too. It is perfectly safe for your baby to be born underwater as they don't take their first breath until they are brought to the surface.

## It may be advised that you leave the water pool:

- > If your waters break and there is meconium in them (your baby has had a poo and most units would suggest your baby needs closer monitoring).
- > If you start to lose more blood than expected (this is more common after your baby has been born) as it is safer and easier to measure blood loss and treat you for this out of the pool.
- > If the pool water needs draining and replacing for any reason e.g. if you were to be sick in the pool water.
- > If your midwife thought there was a problem developing with you or your baby that needed monitoring more closely (for example if your temperature increased).



## TENS machines, Aromatherapy + sacral massage

### TENS (Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation)

A TENS machine is a small machine with wires which provides electrical pulses via pads which stick on your back and can help with contractions through labour. It is best applied early on in labour so you can become used to the sensations and started off on a low setting, so you are able to become accustomed to the tingling sensations. You can gradually build up the strength and the TENS machines which are specially designed for labour should also provide you with a 'boost' button which you can use to top up, usually during a contraction.

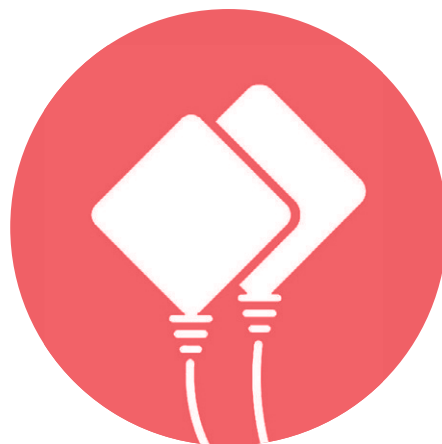
They are thought to work by interfering with the messages sent to the brain during the contractions, like a distraction technique, by helping to relax tense muscles and therefore help with endorphin production, the body's natural cocktail of pain relief chemicals. Some maternity units do have them and can lend them to you during labour, so check with your local unit, or they are available to rent or buy in most chemists.

## Benefits:

- > Many women find them to be effective for pain relief during labour.
- > They are a useful tool to have in your box for pain relief.
- > If you don't like it you can remove it straight away, but the key to getting used to TENS is building up slowly.

## Can you have any other pain relief when using a TENS machine?

Yes, you can use TENS with paracetamol, dihydrocodeine, gas and air, pethidine and diamorphine.



## Aromatherapy

If you research this before labour you will know which oils are useful for their calming and energising properties, but also which ones you like the smell of. Essential oils are the compounds from individual plants, which are extracted by distillation (steaming) or pressing the stem, leaves, flowers or roots. Each plant has unique characteristics and aromas which are reflective within each individual essential oil. There are some essential oils which aren't suitable during pregnancy and labour, so it is wise to be careful when choosing which ones to use.

## Benefits:

- > Aromatherapy uses the natural benefits of plants by using their essential oils to enhance physical and mental wellbeing.
- > Essential oils work by inhalation as they stimulate the limbic part of our brain which can influence behaviours and emotions.
- > The limbic system is responsible for our hormone secretions, emotional reactions and how we perceive our mood to be.



## Essential oils which are safe during pregnancy and labour include

- **Bergamot**  
As well as being stress relieving and helping to soothe anxious minds, this oil is also known for its ability to soothe upset stomachs and to help relieve pain.
- **Eucalyptus**  
Helps to reduce inflammation and pain. Stimulates and increases the blood supply to the skin.
- **Frankincense**  
As well as having a lovely aroma, this oil is perfect to help relieve stress and anxiety during pregnancy. It is especially helpful during labour and the transition phase for its grounding and calming effects.
- **Geranium**  
Was known to be used long ago by the ancient Egyptians as a stress buster. It is also known to relieve anxiety by encouraging the regulation and balance of hormones within the body.
- **Lavender**  
Well known to be calming and relaxing, it is helpful in treating insomnia, anxiety, stress, depression and restlessness. Can stop itching and ease the pain of minor burns, stings, swelling and bruising.

*\*If you have any pets, check with your vet if your chosen oil is safe to use around your animal.*



- **Lemon**  
Has the ability to tackle mental fatigue and stress, as well as helping to calm sickness and upset stomachs.
- **Neroli**  
Helps to reduce stress and cortisol levels in the body. It can also reduce inflammation and help with headaches.
- **Orange**  
Known for its relaxing and sedative properties, as well as being used historically as a pain reliever and an anti-inflammatory.

### How to use:

- > Update to: Essential oils can be several times stronger than dried herbs and should be used with care. They should be diluted, as recommended, with a carrier oil prior to use as undiluted essential oils can cause irritation if applied directly to the skin.
- > The oils may be used by massaging into the skin, in a bath or inhaled using a steam infusion, or burner.

## Massage

Once you have chosen or blended your own massage oil, you can practice different techniques during pregnancy, but it may not be until labour that you discover which ones work the best. Birth partners and/or doulas can be essential for providing massage and pressure for you during labour. Make sure they know which types are more helpful to you than others by experimenting with different techniques during pregnancy and in labour. One of the most useful types of massage during labour can be sacral massage or pressure, which is usually applied firmly at the base of the spine, just above the buttocks.



# Environment, hormones, positions and equipment

If you have chosen to have your labour and birth in hospital, the room allocated can often look very medicalised and distinctly unhomely. This, of course, can affect how comfortable and relaxed you feel during one of the most important days of your life. You will be pleased to know that it doesn't have to be this way though! With a few easy adjustments and added extras you can take control of your birthing environment and make it your own.



## Benefits:

- > The levels of hormones such as oxytocin (the 'love hormone' you need to labour and bond with your baby) and endorphins (naturally occurring painkillers) are affected by your environment and are known to increase when you feel safe, warm, relaxed and are free to move.
- > Oxytocin can be reduced during stressful situations when the hormone adrenaline takes over. Therefore, keeping a relaxing and calming environment around you can help your labour to progress more naturally and effectively.
- > Once you feel more relaxed you will be able to feel as though you can focus on labour and birth and getting into your 'zone'.



Midwife developed with a combination of pure essential oils; Frankincense, Geranium and Orange, which help you to feel calm, grounded and more focused when in labour if you are starting to feel overwhelmed. Also perfect throughout pregnancy, especially in the third trimester.



### How can I use it?

- ✓ Spray onto skin, pulse points, a tissue or your pillow and inhale
- ✓ Your birth partner can keep this spritz close by during labour.
- ✓ Use when in labour and later stages of pregnancy if you are feeling overwhelmed and need to calm and focus yourself to feel more grounded
- ✓ Use this spray alongside other techniques, such as breathing relaxation exercises and hypnobirthing to create a more relaxing environment.
- ✓ Re-spray as often as needed

### ✓ Top Tip

Use this spritz in combination with breathing techniques taught at your antenatal classes to enhance relaxation during labour and birth.

Karen McEwen

Frankincense & Geranium oil helping you to feel grounded, centred and more relaxed Orange oil has properties which calm and uplift allowing you to focus your energy



## How to prepare your environment:

We would like to demonstrate some ideas on how you can adapt your hospital room to help you to own your birth environment and feel more comfortable with your surroundings. The bed can often make your labour feel patient focused and give a medicalised impression. However, the bed can be a useful tool in labour, or if you prefer can be removed totally from your room to create more space for you to be upright and mobile.

### The Bed

- **Move it against the wall** - This can give you more room to mobilise and more floor space to use equipment such as mats, bean bags and birthing balls.
- **Move it out of the room** - Out of sight, out of mind! Without a bed in the room, you'll be more likely to stay upright and mobile and use other equipment which supports upright positions during labour and birth.
- **Adapt it to your advantage** - Labour ward/delivery suite beds are amazing pieces of engineering. They can be converted into wide, comfy chairs, be used to safely squat or kneel on or they can act as a comfortable surface to lean on when you're standing or whilst you're sitting on a birthing ball. They also have supporting bars underneath to hold onto, which can be unclipped to use during labour.
- **Epidurals** - Make the bed work for you if you have an epidural. The back and the bottom of the bed adjusts so you can be upright to help open your pelvis and help your baby move down. It can even be made into a seat.



### Environment

The environment can have a positive or negative impact on your labour. Here are some ideas to make it better for labour and birth.

- Turning the overhead lights off and drawing the curtains can help the room feel less cold and clinical. You can move the spotlight to face the wall or use battery-operated lights to give your room a soft, warm glow. Birthing hormones, like oxytocin, prefer dark or dimmed lighting, so labour often progresses better in darker environments.
- Clocks in the room can be taken down or covered and equipment noises put into silent mode.



- After moving the bed, you can place a birthing mat on which to comfortably kneel, squat, be on all-fours or simply rest over a beanbag or ball. Cover it with a sheet or a throw from home for extra comfort.
- In some hospitals there are specially designed foam beds, which can provide somewhere lower down and comfortable for you and your birthing partner/s to relax.
- Birthing balls, ropes and stools can be brought from other rooms into more medicalised rooms, using these can also support you in labour.



## Remember you can bring your own things from home to help you feel more comfortable

- Battery operated LED tea lights or fairy lights can transform your hospital room into a calm and cosy birth environment.
- Birth affirmations that you can have around the room. These are to remind you of how strong and powerful you are, especially helpful when you feel tired or need an energy boost.
- A photo that makes you feel happy and calm. This could be of your pet, your older children, your wedding or your favourite beach!
- Your own pillow or cushions. Hospital pillows are usually sparse and have a plastic cover which can make them feel a bit crinkly. Your own is bound to feel much nicer!

- **Music** can totally change the way we feel. Listening to your chosen playlist during labour can really transport you to your happy place. Bring headphones if you want to focus and block out external noises.
- A **throw** or **blanket** from home will bring with it smells and textures that help you feel safe and calm.
- A **heat pack** to use as pain-relief or to warm your cold feet-most hospitals will have a designated microwave to rewarm heat packs.
- A **fan** to help you cool down-labour can be a hot and a cold experience!



## Language

Language can play such a key role during labour and can often mean the difference between believing in your ability to labour and birth effectively, to having the power to make you feel as though you are not coping as well as you thought you were. If it's soft tones and positive reinforcements or certain words such as 'pain' you would prefer not to hear, then write these into your birth plan. Make sure you inform your birth partners of how you would like them, and other people involved in your labour to communicate with you during your labour.

Regardless of where you decide to have your baby, you can make the hospital room feel more intimate and homely. Making your labour room your own is part of personalising your experience and making both yours and your birth partners' time there a more relaxing and positive one.



## Pharmacological pain relief

Pharmacological pain relief is in the form of a medicine, some of which are available over the counter and some which need to be prescribed. Here we will explain what is available and in which settings you will be able to access each type.

### Paracetamol

Paracetamol can be bought easily and nearly everywhere, even in supermarkets. It can be helpful during labour, but you need to be careful not to exceed the stated dose, which is 4grms in a 24 hour period. Check on the label, but this is usually no more than 8 tablets spaced evenly in 1gram doses over 24 hours.



### Benefits:

- > It can help more in early labour rather than active labour. If you have a longer latent phase it can be easy to lose track of how many doses of paracetamol you have taken, so ask your birth partner to keep a note of this.
- > Paracetamol can also be helpful when given with other medication such as dihydrocodeine.
- > You may find that it is recommended during active labour by your doctor or midwife and this is because it is effective at reducing body temperature should you develop a fever.



## Dihydrocodeine

This is part of the opioid family and can be helpful by relaxing the body during labour. It changes the way that the brain perceives pain.

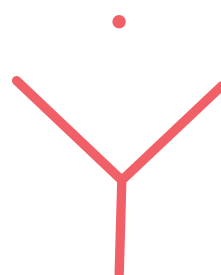
### Benefits:

- > In early labour it may be helpful enough for you to get some sleep, if your labour is longer. A side effect is constipation, so be sure to stay well hydrated to help this as the effects can last after the birth.
- > Dihydrocodeine can also be taken with paracetamol.

## Gas and Air

This is also known as Entonox and laughing gas. It is 50% oxygen and 50% nitrous oxide and inhaled through a mouthpiece connected to a tube.

It works most effectively if you start to take it as soon as you feel a contraction building and continue to breathe it until the contraction has subsided. It can make women feel sick or light-headed - a little bit like drinking alcohol - but these feelings usually subside after using it through a few contractions. Gas and air is inhaled through a mouthpiece connected to a tube, which can be attached to the source in the wall or a portable canister, if the piping doesn't stretch far enough. It is available to use in delivery suites, birth centres and at homebirths.







### Benefits:

- > It helps the body to relax and can help with breathing through a contraction as you need to take some deep breaths whilst using it.
- > Many women manage well using just Entonox if their labours are straightforward and find that they don't need other forms of pain relief.
- > It is a good form of pain relief to try as if you don't like the feeling, it has gone within a few seconds.
- > The effects are short-lasting, and you won't feel drowsy or have problems mobilising after the birth.
- > It doesn't have an effect on the baby, so baby may be more alert after the birth.
- > You can also use gas and air when you are using the birth pool.



## Opioids-Pethidine, diamorphine and meptid

Meptid is rarely used now and is generally considered not to be as effective for pain relief in labour as pethidine or diamorphine. Whichever you choose it is an injection into your thigh or bottom to help you to relax. It takes about 20 minutes to work. The effects of the injection usually last well for up to 4 hours, so it may not be recommended by your midwife if you're getting close to the pushing (second) stage of labour.

### Benefits:

- > If you have had a long labour it can help you to relax or even manage to get some rest and sleep.
- > If you are struggling with the contractions it may help you to relax and for labour to progress more quickly.
- > It may be an option to consider instead of an epidural or before you request an epidural.
- > You will be able to remain more mobile with this form of pain relief than with an epidural.



### Side effects:

There are some side effects of opioids, as they are powerful pain relievers, here are some of the most common:

- They can make you feel sick, therefore an antiemetic, which is an anti-sickness medication, is given to counteract this.
- Some women also say they feel like they forget parts of their labour or don't feel 'with it'. Diamorphine has fewer reported side effects similar to these.
- Your midwife may not recommend opioids during the last stage of labour, as if it is given soon before your baby is born, it can have an effect upon their breathing after the birth.
- Opioids can also have longer lasting effects on your baby for a few hours after birth, where they could be sleepy and have problems feeding.



# Epidural/Spinal block



An epidural is a regional anaesthetic, which means it removes pain from a whole part of the body whilst you remain awake. It effectively blocks the nerves which carry the pain impulses from your abdomen, where your contractions are, to the brain. It has a numbing effect from the waist down, so any sensations during the birth will be either muted or you won't be able to feel much at all. An epidural and a spinal are where anaesthetic drugs are injected into the epidural space in your back/spine. The epidural has a thin line left in and taped to your back so a constant infusion can be administered during labour. A spinal is a similar procedure but a one-off dose and is more commonly used for caesarean sections and repairing more complex tears. It doesn't have the same effects as pethidine or diamorphine which can make you feel sick and/or tired.



## How is it administered?

An anaesthetist is the only person who can give an epidural or spinal, so it will only be available on a consultant-led delivery suite and not in birth centres or at home. Most anaesthetists will insert an epidural whilst you are sat upright on the side of the bed. It is a procedure which needs a sterile area and usually takes around 20 minutes to complete. You will need a cannula in your hand first so fluid can be



given in case your blood pressure drops. You will feel the anaesthetist pressing on your back to find the right space to insert the epidural line, they will then give you a numbing injection which briefly stings. Once it is in place you will be helped to sit back onto the bed and your blood pressure will be checked at intervals whilst the anaesthetic takes effect.



It is always your choice as to whether you have an epidural for pain relief or other reasons, but some of the reasons when an epidural or spinal block is recommended by your midwife or doctor are:

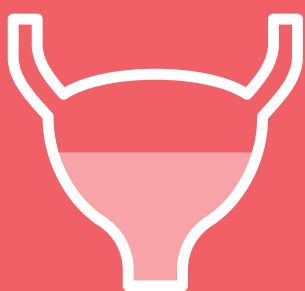
- If you have very high blood pressure during labour, as it is known to help lower blood pressure.
- If you are having a caesarean section instead of having a general anaesthetic, so you can stay awake for the birth.
- During the repair of a 3rd, 4th degree or more complex tear.
- If you needed a manual removal of your placenta because it is not coming away using the usual methods.

## Benefits:

- > For 9/10 women, an epidural gives complete pain relief.
- > It can be helpful for women who are having a long or particularly painful labour.

## Side effects:

- An epidural is a continual infusion so, if you need an epidural for a while or have several top-up doses you may feel more numb or have quite a heavy sensation in your legs and bottom. This can mean you may need help to move and turn on the bed.
- Your blood pressure may drop too much, which can affect your baby's heartrate too - this is usually rectified by giving you more fluids via a cannula and position changes.
- Having an epidural usually means that your baby's heart rate needs monitoring throughout your labour. This can be done using belts and a transducer on your abdomen or via a fetal scalp electrode, which is a clip applied to your baby's head.
- You will also need to have good bladder care, so your midwife will help you to regularly empty your bladder either with a bedpan or a catheter.



- During the 2nd stage of labour, you probably won't have very much sensation to push your baby out and will need to take some guidance from your midwife or doctor. Pushing at the right time will help you move your baby through the birth canal more effectively.
- For women having their first babies an epidural increases the chances of needing assistance during the birth. This would be via forceps or ventouse- a suction cup- to help guide your baby's head out whilst you push.
- When you have an epidural, your midwife or doctor will wait longer for the baby's head to come down (before you start pushing), if the baby is coping well during this time. This reduces the chance you'll need help with forceps or ventouse during the birth. You can also ask not to have the epidural topped up close to the birth, so the effect wears off and you can feel the urge to push and where to push to more easily.
- About 1 in 100 women gets a headache after an epidural. If this happens, it can be treated once your baby has been born and your doctor will explain the plan for this when you are on the postnatal ward.



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