

Post-Dural Puncture Headache

Information for women with headache
following an epidural or spinal injection

Maternity Services

① For more information, please contact:

The anaesthetist on Labour ward:

Telephone York: 01904 722004

Telephone Scarborough: 01723 342124

Contents	Page
Introduction	4
What causes the headache?	5
How can I get rid of the headache?	6
What is an epidural blood patch?	7
What happens after an epidural blood patch?	9
Tell us what you think of this leaflet	10
Teaching, training and research.....	10
Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS).....	10
Leaflets in alternative languages or formats	12

This leaflet aims to give you general information about the headache that may develop after having an epidural or spinal injection. If you have any further questions or concerns, please discuss this with your anaesthetist.

Introduction

Following childbirth either by Caesarean delivery or a vaginal birth, it is common to develop a headache. However after having an epidural or spinal injection, there is a one in 50-100 and one in 200 chance respectively, of developing a specific type of headache called a 'post-dural puncture headache' (PDPH).

This headache characteristically develops within the first few days following your epidural or spinal and is often described as a severe headache. It is typically worse on sitting, standing or bending forwards and usually feels much better on lying down flat. The headache is occasionally also accompanied with neck pain, sickness (nausea) and dislike of bright lights.

What causes the headache?

The brain and spinal cord are surrounded by a fluid filled sac called the dura. The post-dural puncture headache can occur following a needle entering this sac causing a small hole. This causes fluid to leak out and it's thought this leads to a drop in pressure of the fluid around the brain, resulting in a headache.

With a spinal injection a fine needle intentionally enters this sac, as this is the space that the local anaesthetic must be injected in to. It is unclear in these situations why some women go on to experience post-dural puncture headaches, but most do not. With an epidural the needle does not enter the sac, although occasionally the needle can accidentally make a hole in the dura. In this situation the woman is then more likely to get a post-dural puncture headache.

How can I get rid of the headache?

On the whole, people recover from a post-dural puncture headache within a few days to a few weeks and have no further problems. Although it should get better on its own, we realise that these are the first few weeks of your baby's life. If, despite following the below methods it does not improve your anaesthetist may offer you a treatment called a blood patch (this is described in more detail in the next section).

Things you can do to help:

Bed rest

**Drink plenty of
fluids and
caffeinated
drinks**

**Regular
painkillers
(such as
paracetamol and
ibuprofen)**

**Avoid heavy
lifting or
straining**

**Time
(it may get better
in a few days)**

What is an epidural blood patch?

An epidural blood patch is similar to having an epidural and is performed by two anaesthetists. One anaesthetist will take some blood from the arm and the other will perform the epidural blood patch. It is normally carried out in the anaesthetic room in theatre and is performed in a sterile manner. The blood patch is usually performed more than 24 hours after the puncture has happened. During the procedure blood is taken from a vein in your arm.

This blood is then injected into your epidural space. You will be asked to lie down for a few hours after the blood patch to allow the clot to form in the correct place. The blood will clot and seal the leak of fluid, to help stop the headache.

Before the procedure, you will be asked to sign a consent form (reference FYCON165-3) confirming that you understand the procedure and wish to go ahead. A copy will be kept in your patient notes, and you can have a copy for your own records.

What are the benefits?

The benefit is relief from the post-dural headache.

! Side effects of a blood patch:

- About one in five don't stop the headache so you might need another one.
- There may be pain when blood is injected into your back.
- There is a small chance (one in 50-100) of another dural puncture resulting in worsening headache.
- Infection in the central nervous system, nerve damage (permanent damage can occur in one in 24,000) or bleeding into your back are other rare complications.

Are there any alternatives?

The only alternative is to continue with self-management of the headache mentioned earlier in the leaflet.

What happens after an epidural blood patch?

After a blood patch your anaesthetist may ask you to lie flat in bed for two to four hours and not to lift anything heavy for at least two days.

The majority of patients with a post-dural puncture headache will feel immense relief within a few minutes to hours of the blood patch being performed.

If the anaesthetist is happy with your progress, you may be allowed to go home. You can look after your baby, including breastfeeding, as usual.

! Contact the hospital urgently if you develop:

- **Severe back pain**
- **A high temperature**
- **Worsening headache with neck stiffness**
- **Leg weakness**
- **Incontinence of urine or stool**

Contact us at York 01904 722004 or Scarborough 01723 342124 or attend your nearest accident and emergency department if you develop these problems.

Tell us what you think of this leaflet

We hope that you found this leaflet helpful. If you would like to tell us what you think, please contact:
Anaesthetics Department, The York Hospital, Wigginton Road, York, YO31 8HE or telephone 01904 725398.

Teaching, training and research

Our Trust is committed to teaching, training and research to support the development of health and healthcare in our community. Healthcare students may observe consultations for this purpose. You can opt out if you do not want students to observe. We may also ask you if you would like to be involved in our research.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS offers impartial advice and assistance to patients, their relatives, friends and carers. We can listen to feedback (positive or negative), answer questions and help resolve any concerns about Trust services.

PALS can be contacted on 01904 726262, or email yhs-tr.patientexperienceteam@nhs.net.

An answer phone is available out of hours.

Leaflets in alternative languages or formats

If you would like this information in a different format, including braille or easy read, or translated into a different language, please speak to a member of staff in the ward or department providing your care.

Patient Information Leaflets can be accessed via the Trust's Patient Information Leaflet website:

www.yorkhospitals.nhs.uk/your-visit/patient-information-leaflets/

Owner	Dr A Hamshire/ Dr D Feizula/ Dr K Robins, Anaesthetics Department
Date first issued	January 2014
Review Date	August 2028
Version	4 (issued August 2025)
Approved by	Obstetrics and Gynaecology CGG
Linked to consent form	FYCON165-3 Epidural blood patch v2.2
Document Reference	PIL 1170 v4.2
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