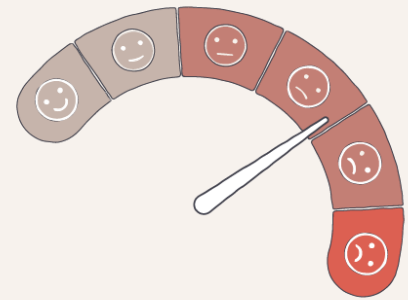


## my birth

# pain management during labor

Many people wonder what labor and birth will feel like and how they will handle that pain. Everybody experiences labor differently. Pain during the labor process is usually normal. There are lots of ways to make you feel more comfortable.

Pain happens when your nerves send signals to your brain to alert you that something is happening to your body. During labor, you might feel pain from your uterus contracting or from the position of the baby. Contractions may feel like cramping that becomes stronger as labor continues. You might feel an intense pressure when it's time to push the baby out.



The more people feel relaxed, supported, and safe, the easier it is to deal with pain. Some people want to avoid medications during labor and use other ways to decrease their discomfort. Other people plan to use medications to help at different points in their labor. There is no right or wrong choice. Your care team will support you no matter what.

## Pain relief without medication

Some of these options require tools or equipment. Talk to your midwife or doula about what might be available at the hospital and what you might want to pack in your birth bag. You can also read the “Labor Begins” handout for more detail about some of these pain relief options.

- Water therapy (tub or shower)
- Ice packs or heating pads
- Counter pressure on hips or lower back
- Massage
- TENS electrical nerve stimulation
- Acupuncture/ acupressure
- Essential oils diffused or massaged
- Distraction (e.g. movies, conversation)
- Movement
- Rhythms like tapping a foot, swaying back and forth, or repeating a word or phrase during contractions. You might find a “ritual” like this without trying, or your support team can help with this.

# Pain relief using medications

## Nitrous Oxide (or “laughing gas”)

This is a mixture of nitrous oxide and oxygen gas that you can breathe in through a mask. You place the mask over your nose and mouth when you want relief.

### Advantages

- Quick acting. You can feel it working in about a minute.
- Can be started or stopped at any time.
- Effects wear off right away when you take the mask off.
- Can be used during all stages of labor.
- You control when to put the mask on and take it off.
- You can keep freedom of movement.
- It helps with relaxation.
- You can use this even if you plan on using other medication later in your labor.
- There are no side effects for newborns.

### Disadvantages/Side Effects

- Less effective for pain relief than epidural.
- Some people may feel drowsiness, dizziness, nausea, and vomiting.
- Not all hospitals have this available.
- Some hospitals require a negative COVID-19 test before using this.

## Narcotic medications

Pain medicine such as morphine and fentanyl are narcotics. They're given by injection into a muscle (IM) or through an IV already in place in your arm.

### Advantages

- Quick acting. You can feel it working within a few minutes.
- May give you enough relief to rest or sleep, especially in the early part of labor.
- May be an alternative for those wanting to avoid epidural anesthesia.

### Disadvantages/Side effects

- Side effects: nausea, drowsiness, itching, trouble concentrating.
- Some people feel a lot of pain relief and for others it just “takes the edge off”.



- The effects do not last very long for most people. You are limited to how many doses of the medication you can receive throughout labor.
- This medication does pass through the placenta to babies. It is usually safe for babies, but can cause them to be drowsy or decrease their rate of breathing for a short period of time. For this reason, this medication is not given when birth is close.
- In rare cases babies need to be given another medication to take this medication out of their bloodstream and to help them start breathing.

## Epidurals/Spinals

Medication is directly injected into the space around your spinal cord. A small catheter (tube) remains in place for the rest of the labor to provide a steady stream of medication. ***For more information about how this works, please see the “Epidural” handout.***

### Advantages

- You will feel less pain during labor. It will take away severe contraction pain well for most people. You will usually be able to rest or sleep.
- May be more effective and long-lasting for pain relief than other medications.
- If you need a C-section, the epidural may be adjusted for numbing during surgery, and you can be awake during the birth of your baby.

### Disadvantages/Side effects

- You may feel light headed, shivery, or sick to your stomach. Some people feel itchy when they have an epidural.
- You will need a tube to drain your bladder.
- You will be limited to staying in bed for the rest of your labor (though your care team will still help you change positions safely in bed).
- You will be connected to more monitoring equipment to look at the baby’s heart rate and your vital signs.
- You will not be able to eat most foods while the epidural is in place. Depending on the hospital, you may be able to drink clear fluids (like broth, juice, and Jell-O).
- It may not provide total pain relief. Sometimes you will still feel pressure in your bottom during the pushing stage.
- In some cases, the epidural may need to be replaced.
- Pushing may be more difficult or last longer, since numbing can decrease the urge to push. It may increase the need to use a vacuum or forceps to help your baby's birth.

- Your blood pressure may drop too much or too quickly after an epidural causing decreased blood flow to your baby. Usually this can be corrected by fluids or medications. But rarely, you may need an emergent c-section birth.
- Very rarely, people develop a severe headache from the epidural. This can be treated.
- You may feel soreness or bruising in the area where the epidural was placed once the medication is turned off. This is usually mild and goes away on its own as your body heals.

## Before labor begins, build your toolbox

### Know what to expect

Feeling prepared can help decrease anxiety about the sensations you will feel. Childbirth education classes, videos, or books are great resources. Ask us if you would like recommendations of what classes to pick.

### Practice relaxing

Relaxation techniques can help you cope with both pain and stress throughout pregnancy and labor. You can start using these at any point. The more you try them, the easier they will become. Some examples are breathing techniques, guided meditation (you can use a free app to help you get started, like Smiling Mind, Insight Timer, Calm Birth, or UCLA Mindful), and HypoBirthing (a specific method that uses hypnosis techniques for labor). You can find videos online or local classes that specialize in this.

### Consider your environment

You might prefer a calm, quiet space with low lighting, or a room with support people and energetic music playing at different points in your labor. Think about things that might give you comfort when you're stressed, like a favorite blanket, a momentum to remind you of a loved one, or a special playlist with songs that make you feel good.

### Plan ahead with your support team

You doula, midwife, family members, and friends are there to talk about any specific questions or concerns. Your care team can give you recommendations and help you find resources.

