



Accidental dural puncture and post dural puncture headache

Cause

Accidental dural puncture occurs in less than one percent of epidurals. It occurs when the dura (a membrane that surrounds the fluid that bathes the spinal cord) has been punctured with the epidural needle, making a small hole. The fluid which surrounds the spinal cord can then leak out of this hole.

Effect

A headache is the most common side effect of fluid leaking out of the hole. This is called a **post dural puncture headache**. Headaches are very common after giving birth, so not every headache should be blamed on the epidural. The headache from an epidural is likely to be different to headaches you have experienced before – it is postural, which means it occurs when you are sitting or standing up and improves upon lying down. Other symptoms you may experience include neck stiffness, tinnitus (ringing in the ears), blurred vision and nausea.

Treatment

Initially the headache is treated with simple measures such as ensuring you get adequate rest and fluids. Simple pain medication such as Panadol and Nurofen are also used.

If the headache is interfering with your ability to care for your baby, or if it is particularly severe, we may talk to you about having an **epidural blood patch**.

This procedure is done by a specialist anaesthetist under sterile conditions. An epidural is performed and 20ml of your **own** blood is put through the epidural needle. The injected blood potentially forms a clot over the hole and stops the fluid from leaking out. This is the best treatment for severe headaches, but it is not effective in everyone. If it does not work the first time, then a second blood patch may be recommended.

After the blood patch

It will be necessary to stay in bed for at least two hours. Then you can get up and move about as usual. You may have some residual back pain which should resolve over a few days.

If your headache returns or you have any questions, please call King Edward Memorial Hospital on **6458 2222** and ask to speak with the duty anaesthetist (pager **3225**).

In the future

A dural puncture or epidural blood patch does not affect the ability to have an epidural or spinal anaesthesia in the future. However, the next time you need an epidural, please let the anaesthetist know about the previous dural puncture.

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