



## Epidural Anesthesia: Important Facts that will Help You Take Charge of Your Birth

Written by Alyssa Benedict, M.P.H.

Sunday, 01 September 2013 00:00 - Last Updated Tuesday, 03 December 2013 11:20

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What is often missing from conversations about epidurals – conversations with practitioners as well as friends and family – may impact your decision to have one. This article describes some of the most important considerations when thinking about an epidural for your birth. It is not

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**The Importance of Authentic Decision-Making** An authentic decision is one that is made based on conscious awareness of cultural influences on the decisionmaking process itself and the evidence-based risks and benefits of the particular practice or intervention one is considering. Many women are not making authentic decisions about birth interventions, including epidurals. This is, in many ways, understandable. Many women assume that if there were risks involved in having an epidural, their practitioners would tell them; therefore, they do not ask. Women may request or consent to an epidural precisely because they lack a full appreciation of what choosing an epidural

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infection, misplacement  
of catheter/anesthetic

- Unsafe for mother.

Decrease in mother s  
release of oxytocin

- Epidurals disrupt important hormone shifts that naturally occur during labor (e.g., oxytocin causes a

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**The Epidural Chain: A Cascade of Risky Interventions.** One of the most important considerations regarding use of epidural anesthesia is that it is never an isolated intervention. The epidural chain is the phenomenon whereby use of an epidural is accompanied by or leads to other interventions, each with its own risks, and causes a combined or cumulative risk effect. Various procedures and interventions automatically accompany epidurals and are often dictated by hospital policy. These include, but are not limited to, bed confinement and limited movement, intravenous fluids, restrictions on oral intake of food and fluids, continuous electronic fetal monitoring, oxytocin/Pitocin for labor stimulation, an indwelling bladder catheter, and oxygen by mask.<sup>33</sup> If you are considering an epidural, it is important to understand the risks and benefits of these and other interventions that will accompany the procedure. The epidural chain is virtually absent from discourse between





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practitioners while simultaneously taking the initiative to develop an evidence-based fund of information about pregnancy and birthing that is available and accessible through a variety of educational resources. It is critically important to seek out the information that is available about

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This article appeared in

*Pathways to Family Wellness*