

Headache Following an Epidural Injection



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What is special about the headache?

After having an epidural steroid injection or spinal anesthetic procedure, you have a 1 in 100 to 1 in 500 chance of developing a “post-dural puncture” headache.

This typically occurs 1 to 7 days after undergoing the epidural or spinal anesthetic. It is usually a severe headache (felt at the front or back of your head); it improves when lying down and is worse while sitting or standing. Along with the headache, you may also experience neck pain, sickness and sensitivity to bright lights.

“...it was like the worst hangover in the world...”

Young patients and women receiving an epidural during childbirth are more likely than other patient populations to experience a post dural puncture headache.

What causes the headache?

Your brain and spinal cord are contained in a bag of fluid, known as the *dura*; the fluid is called the *cerebrospinal fluid* (CSF).

When an **epidural** is given, a needle is used to inject local anesthetic just outside the dura. Occasionally, the needle passes through the dura: the chances of this occurring depend on the experience of the anesthesiologist and

certain patient related circumstances. You can discuss this with your anesthesiologist or interventional pain management specialist.

When a **spinal** is given, a fine needle is inserted into the dura deliberately to inject local anesthetic into the CSF.

If too much fluid leaks out through the hole in the dura, the pressure in the rest of the fluid is reduced. If you sit up, the pressure around your brain is reduced even more. This decreased pressure can cause the symptoms typical of a post dural puncture headache.

Some patients compare this to a very bad migraine which is made worse when sitting or standing.

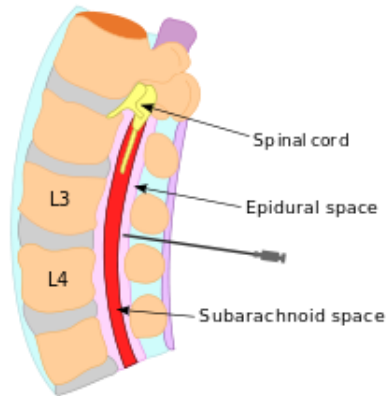
What can be done about the headache?

Lying flat and taking simple pain relieving drugs (such as Tylenol and ibuprofen) may help. You should **drink plenty of fluids** (some people find tea, coffee or cola especially helpful) and avoid lifting and straining.

The hole in the dura will usually seal in a number of weeks, however it is not usually advisable to wait for this to occur. Rarely, further complications can occur due to the leaking fluid.

A post dural puncture headache can be treated with an **epidural blood patch**.

What is a blood patch?



The anesthesiologist takes blood from your arm and injects it into your back, near to the hole in the dura. The blood will clot and will plug the hole. This feels similar to having the original epidural or spinal injection. The blood patch procedure takes about a half an hour.

In 60–70% people who have this kind of headache, the blood patch will cure the headache within 24 hours. If the headache remains, you may be advised to have a second blood patch. It is very rare to need more than two blood patches.

It is recommended that you lie flat in bed for 4 hours following the blood patch; also, it is best that you refrain from lifting anything heavy for at least two days. You may need someone at home with you to assist with your daily activities.

What potential complications are associated with a blood patch?

A blood patch may cause local bruising and backache which lasts for a few days.

There is a small chance that another accidental dural puncture could occur. Infection or bleeding are very rare complications of epidurals, spinals and blood patches.

Difficulty passing urine, severe pain or loss of sensation in your back or legs is not normal and you should contact your provider immediately.



CAUTION: Call the doctor immediately or go to the Emergency Room if any of your symptoms worsen.

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