

Labour of Love

WITH SO MANY PAIN RELIEF OPTIONS THESE DAYS, IT CAN BE HARD TO KNOW WHAT TO CHOOSE, IF ANYTHING, SAYS SARAH E. LUDWIG.

You may be wondering whether or not you should consider using some sort of pain medication while you're in labour. Whether it's your first baby or your fourth, the question is in the back of most mums' minds. With so many pain relief options these days, it can be hard to know what to choose, if anything.

According to Dr Chua Yang, an obstetrician and gynaecologist at A Clinic For Women, the use of pain relievers is a very individual decision. "The method of choice depends on the mother-to-be's past medical and anaesthetic history, any spinal deformity, allergies to drugs, order of birth and, of course, pain threshold," she says.

Even with mums who are reluctant to use pain medication, "I always encourage them to leave the options open and experience some labour pains before making a decision about whether pain relief is necessary. At the end of the day, the priority is safety of both mother and baby, as well as to achieve a vaginal birth. If a mother struggles for 12 hours with pain and is too exhausted or distraught to push, resulting in the need for forceps or vacuum

delivery or even a C-section, there is absolutely nothing 'natural' about that," says Dr Chua.

To help you make an informed decision about how to handle your labour pain, we've come up with a list of options, with plenty of input from Dr Chua.

Narcotic Injections

Usually given either in the buttocks or through an IV, these shots are generally viewed as an easy form of pain control.

PROS: Though they don't take away all of the pain, around 60-70 per cent relief is typical, says Dr Chua, they take the edge off for several hours. They don't slow labour down either, as some other choices can.

CONS: Narcotics may have a sedative effect on the baby. "This can result in a very 'sleepy' baby at birth who may fail to breathe and cry, which is a medical emergency," Dr Chua says. The injections may also cause nausea, drowsiness and dizziness in mums.

Entonox Gas

Commonly known as "laughing gas," entonox is a mixture of oxygen and

nitrous oxide inhaled by labouring mothers.

PROS: Like narcotic injections, entonox gas doesn't take away all the pain, about 30 per cent, according to Dr Chua, but it helps mums relax quickly and is completely non-invasive. It's most effective for mothers who are having their second or greater baby, since their labours tend to be faster and the need for the gas is shorter. It's also completely safe for babies.

CONS: Entonox gas can't be used for long because it causes disorientation and confusion with continuous inhalation. Its effects wear off very quickly after discontinuing inhalation. It can make you feel light-headed or sick as well.

Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulator (TENS)

A TENS machine is a small box with electrical wires that attach to the labouring mum's back via sticky pads coated with gel. It gives off small electrical pulses to help minimise pain and can be adjusted to desired strength and frequency.

PROS: TENS is portable, completely under the patient's

control, non-invasive, easy to use and has no side effects, making it a good choice for mums who are worried about using medication.

CONS: "Pain relief is very individual and inconsistent," says Dr Chua. It can also be fairly expensive to rent a machine.

Acupuncture

Totally non-medicinal, acupuncture is the use of tiny needles in specific areas to help relieve pain during labour.

PROS: Acupuncture is an alternative therapy and, like the TENS machine, completely non-invasive. There are no side effects or risks to the baby.

CONS: It's very time-intensive and the acupuncturist will most likely have to "repeat application at relatively short intervals," says Dr Chua.

Hypnotherapy

Another non-invasive procedure, hypnotherapy is used to alter the perception of pain.

PROS: There are no side effects. There may be a shorter labour due to a more relaxed mum, and using hypnotherapy can mean fewer complications and interventions during birth.

CONS: As with TENS, the individual result varies.

Epidural/ Spinal Block

Perhaps the most well-known pain relief option, an epidural or spinal block is a painkiller put into the spine, causing the nerves that carry pain-signalling messages to be blocked. It stays in until the baby is born and the placenta is delivered.

PROS: Epidurals are known for their great effectiveness, relieving about 90 per cent of labour pain, according to Dr Chua. They allow

mums to rest and gather energy for pushing the baby out later, "as well as avoid premature involuntary pushing and bearing down before full dilation is achieved," Dr Chua says. The medication usually has little or no effect on the baby. Epidurals work fast and mums stay awake and alert during the labour process. If a C-section ends up being needed, it's easy and painless to introduce other necessary medication to perform the procedure. Epidurals create decreased blood pressure, so for someone who has difficulties with high blood pressure, it can be a good choice.

CONS: It can be scary to have a needle put into your back. Patients using an epidural/ spinal block have to stay in bed. Pushing may take longer because there is little feeling. There is a very small risk of severe headache or nerve damage that could leave a numb area on the leg, but this is rare and usually temporary.

There are a variety of alternative (read: non-invasive and non-medicinal) pain relief and birthing methods designed to help minimize pain as well, such as labouring in and/or giving birth in warm water, massage, heat therapy, birth balls, breathing techniques, music therapy, yoga and acupressure. Any of these can be researched as possibilities for incorporation into your birth plan.

Whatever your pain relief choice ends up being, "mothers who know they are empowered to decide for themselves if they need pain relief will have the confidence and the courage to experience labour," says Dr Chua. Arming yourself with knowledge of what options are available and which ones might be best for you enables you to have a birth plan that meets you and your baby's needs. Because, after all, you want your labour to be the best experience it can be! 



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