PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Epidural Analgesia

This information explains epidural analgesia (ep-pee-DUR-al an-al-GEE-sia) and the procedure to place an epidural catheter.

About Epidural Analgesia

Epidural analgesia is pain medication given to you through your epidural space (the space in your spine just outside your spinal cord). The medication is given through a plastic catheter (thin, flexible tube).

Epidural analgesia has fewer side effects than medication that’s given through an intravenous (IV) line. For example, when you have epidural analgesia you are less likely to have:

- Nausea (feeling like you’re going to throw up)
- Vomiting (throwing up)
- Fatigue (feeling more tired or weak than usual)

Having Your Epidural Catheter Placed

Before your epidural catheter is placed, you will meet with a doctor who’s a pain specialist. They will explain the procedure and answer your questions. An IV line will be placed in a vein in your arm, and you will get medication through the IV to make you relaxed and sleepy. A nurse will monitor your heart, breathing, and blood pressure.

While you sit on the bed, your doctor will ask you to bend forward, so your back is curved like the letter “C.” They will give you a shot of medication to numb the area of your back where the epidural catheter will be placed. It may burn for a few seconds, but then it will get numb. Once your back is numb, your doctor will use a needle to find the right area and place the catheter. You may feel pressure in your back while this is happening, but you shouldn’t feel much pain.
Once the catheter is in place, your doctor will test it with a small amount of medication. Once your doctor sees the medication is working, the needle will be removed and you will lie back in the bed. The plastic catheter will stay in your back, securely taped.

After Your Epidural Catheter Is Placed

Your healthcare provider will give you our Patient-Controlled Analgesia (PCA) (www.mskcc.org/pe/pca) resource, which explains how you can give yourself pain medication through your epidural catheter. A doctor or nurse practitioner will see you every day after your surgery. They will check your pain level and your epidural catheter and will adjust your pain medication, your catheter, or both, to keep you comfortable.

If you have any questions, contact a member of your healthcare team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5:00 PM, during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.