

Risks of Regional Anaesthesia (Epidurals & Spinals) and General Anaesthesia Explained

Explaining risk can be a challenge when it comes to epidurals and general anaesthetic during pregnancy. There are many ways of trying to explain the likelihood of an event occurring in a certain circumstance.

It is normal that you will have questions and concerns regarding the risk involved with the procedures that form part of your pregnancy journey.

The scale below can provide some clarity about the true risk and chances of something occurring. Though in most instances giving a definitive probability is impossible, by bracketing the likelihood of an event into the below terms, you can gain an understanding of how likely or unlikely something is to occur:



Very Common

Around 1 in 10 chance – the number of people in your close family



Common

Around 1 in 100 chance – the number of people that might live on your street



Uncommon

Around 1 in 1,000 chance – the population of your local community



Rare

Around 1 in 10,000 chance – the population of a small town



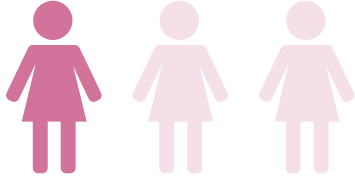
Very Rare

Around 1 in 100,000 chance – the population of a large town

Risks of Epidurals or Spinals for Birth

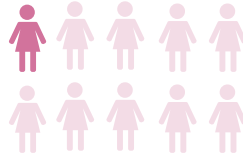
Very Common or Common

Itching:



1 in every 3 women

Epidural not proving effective enough in labour so further attention is needed to help function:



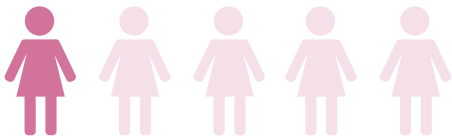
1 in every 10 women



1 in every 20 women

*Needing resite during labour as not working as effectively as needed.

Easily treatable drop in blood pressure during caesarean:



Spinal

1 in every 5 women



Epidural

1 in every 50 women

Regional anaesthetic not working well enough for caesarean section and general anaesthetic is needed:



Spinal

1 in every 50 women



Epidural

1 in every 20 women

Severe Headache

Epidural

1 in every 100 women*

Spinal

1 in every 100 - 200 women*

*subject to individual unit variation

Rare or Very Rare

Nerve damage (for example numb patch on a leg or foot):

1 in every 13,000 - 24,000 women

1 in every 1,000 women *temporary

Severe nerve injury:

1 in every 13,000 women

Paralysis:

1 in every 250,000 women

Abscess (infection) in the spine at the site of the spinal or epidural:

1 in every 50,000 women

Meningitis:

1 in every 100,000 women

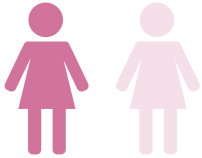
Haematoma (blood clot) in the spine at the site of the spinal or epidural:

1 in every 170,000 women

Risks of General Anaesthetic during birth

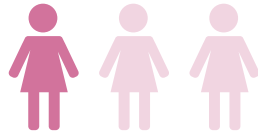
Very Common or Common

Sore throat:



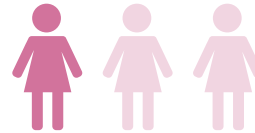
1 in every 2 women

Shivering:



1 in every 3 women

Muscle pain:



1 in every 3 women

Feeling sick:



1 in every 10 women

Uncommon or Rare

Awareness of procedure:

• 1 in every 256 women^[1]

Stomach acid going into lungs:

• 1 in every 1,000 women

Damage to teeth:

• 1 in every 4,500 women

Very Rare

Severe allergic reaction:

1 in every 10,000 women

Similar to the chance of a person being struck by lightning in their lifetime.^[2]

Brain damage or death:

1 in every 100,000 women

Similar to the chance of a person dying during a sky dive.^[3]

What to remember

For any procedure that is required during your pregnancy, remember that you are in safe hands. Medical staff are trained to the highest standards and know what to do when the unexpected happens. So even in the rare case of something out of the ordinary happening, they will know how best to deal with the situation at hand.

Interesting recent studies on this topic include:

- Midwifery care in labour guidance for all women in all settings; The Royal College of Midwives;

November 2018

- Maternity Services survey 2018; CareQuality Commission; *January 2019*

- What matters to women during childbirth: A systematic qualitative review; Soo Downe, Kenneth Finlayson, Olufemi Oladapo, Mercedes Bonet, A. Metin Gülmezoglu; *April 2018*

- Saving Lives, Improving Mothers' Care; National Perinatal Epidemiology Unit; *October 2018*

Sources

1. Odor, P.M., Bampoe, S., Lucas, D.N., Moonesinghe, S.R., Andrade, J., Pandit, J.J. and (2021), Incidence of accidental awareness during general anaesthesia in obstetrics: a multicentre, prospective cohort study. *Anaesthesia*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anae.15385>

2. Medical Aspects of Lightning, National Weather Service, 2011

3. British Parachute Association - www.bpa.org.uk/staysafe/how-safe

*All statistics included are approximations and will be refreshed at regular intervals as more literature is published.
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