

Patient information

Headache following a spinal or epidural

(Post dural puncture headache)

Severe headache

We are sorry that you have experienced a severe headache following your spinal or epidural anaesthetic. It is usually felt at the front or back of your head, and feels better when you are lying down and worse when you are sitting, standing, straining or bending forwards. You may also have been troubled by some nausea or vomiting and possibly had some visual or hearing disturbance.

Why did I get the headache?

When you received your spinal or epidural anaesthesia, a small hole was made in a layer of tissue in your back called the 'dura'. Anaesthetists intend to do this during a spinal anaesthesia (when a very tiny needle is used), or it could have been performed accidentally during an epidural anaesthesia. Fluid from within your spinal space may have leaked through this hole and caused the headache, known as a "post dural puncture headache". The risk of this happening to anyone is around 1 in 200 mothers who have had an epidural / spinal anaesthesia.

How can I get rid of the headache?

Bed rest and simple painkillers such as paracetamol or anti-inflammatory medicines may be the only treatment you need. You should drink plenty of fluid (some people find caffeine-containing drinks especially helpful) and avoid lifting heavy weights or straining. If these simple measures have not helped sufficiently, your anaesthetist may have offered you a procedure called a blood patch.

What is a blood patch?

We aim to seal the hole in the dura with some blood taken from your arm. You will most likely lie on your side while the anaesthetist places another epidural in your lower back. The blood from your arm will be injected slowly into your back. The epidural needle will be removed at the end of the procedure. It is normal to feel pressure or discomfort in your back during the injection. If it is painful, please tell the anaesthetist. The whole procedure will take about half an hour. It is important to lie flat for 2 – 3 hours to allow the blood to clot and begin sealing the hole.

Is a blood patch dangerous?

Any invasive procedure will carry some risks. Bruising around the needle insertion area and temporary backache are the most common complications. There is a less than 1% chance of the needle creating another accidental hole in the dura. Infection, nerve damage or bleeding into your back are other rare complications.

It is important to do the following before your procedure:

- Tell the anaesthetist if you are taking any blood-thinning medication.
- Tell the anaesthetist if you have had an injection of blood-thinning drugs in the last 12 hours.
- Tell the anaesthetist if you have had a temperature or not feeling well in the last 24 hours.
- Go to the toilet beforehand.

Is a blood patch always successful?

For 60% to 70% of patients, the blood patch will cure the headache within a few minutes to a few hours. If your headache persists after 24 to 48 hours, a second blood patch may be advised.

What happens next?

Once your headache improves you will be allowed home. **The following guidelines are advisable:**

- Please continue to drink plenty of fluid.

- Continue to take your prescribed painkillers if you feel you need them, especially if you still have a mild headache. If you do need them, take them regularly.
- Have plenty of rest at home.
- Avoid heavy lifting or housework for at least one week after the headache is better. You may lift your baby, but not your toddler, should you have one.
- Take a laxative to avoid constipation.

Action if symptoms persist

If your symptoms reappear, worsen or if you develop a temperature and feel unwell, please seek medical advice.

If you are unable to contact your own midwife or General Practitioner (GP) then contact Ward F11 on 01284 713216 and ask to speak to a midwife.

Explain to the midwife that you have had treatment for a dural puncture headache and your symptoms have returned or worsened. The ward staff will arrange for you to be assessed by an Obstetric Anaesthetist. They will examine you and discuss any further treatment with you. Also if you experience any of the side effects outlined in the leaflet about spinals or epidurals, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

If you would like any information regarding access to the West Suffolk Hospital and its facilities please visit the website for AccessAble (the new name for DisabledGo) <https://www.accessable.co.uk/organisations/west-suffolk-nhs-foundation-trust>



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