

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

A large, white, stylized swirl graphic on the left side of the purple background.

Information for patients



Leeds
Maternity Care

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 house)



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



One in every three women.

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



One in every 10 women.

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

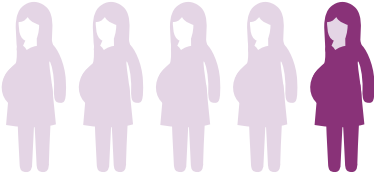


One in every 20 women.

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

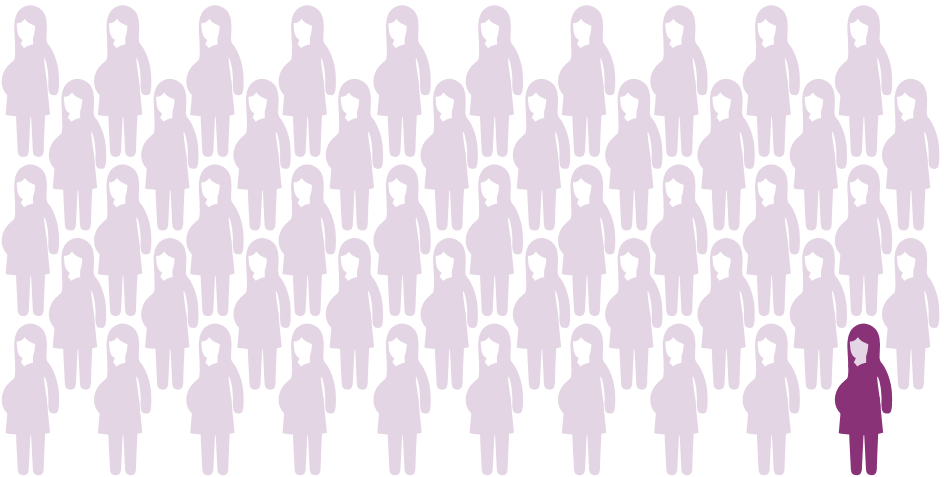
Easily treatable drop in blood pressure during caesarean:

Spinal



One in every five women.

Epidural



One in every 50 women.

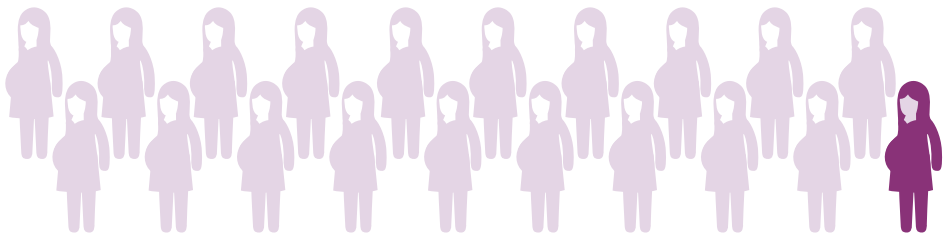
Regional anaesthetic not working well enough for caesarean section and general anaesthetic is needed:

Spinal



One in every 50 women.

Epidural



One in every 20 women.

Severe Headache:

Spinal



Epidural

One in every 100-200 women*

One in every 100 women*

**subject to individual unit variation*

Rare or Very Rare

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

One in every 13,000 - 24,000 women.

One in every 1,000 women *temporary



Severe nerve injury:

One in every 13,000 women.



Paralysis:

One in every 250,000 women.

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

One in every 50,000 women.



Meningitis:

One in every 100,000 women.

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

One in every 170,000 women.



Risks of General Anaesthetic during birth

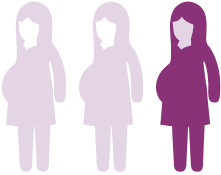
Very Common or Common

Sore throat:



One in every two women.

Shivering:



One in every three women.

Muscle pain:



One in every three women.

Feeling sick:



One in every 10 women.

Uncommon or Rare

Awareness of procedure:

One in every 256 women



Stomach acid going into lungs:

One in every 1,000 women



Damage to teeth:

One in every 4,500 women



Very Rare

Severe allergic reaction:

One in every 10,000 women

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



Brain damage or death:

One 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. March 2021 Edition*

Further information

For more information/discussion or if concerned about any of the included signs or symptoms please contact the Delivery suite and ask to be put through to the on-call anaesthetist.

SJUH: 0113 206 9103

LGI: 0113 392 7445

All information has been provided by: LabourPains.com



What did you think of your care?

Scan the QR code or visit bit.ly/nhsleedsfft

Your views matter



© The Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust • 2nd edition (Ver 1)
Developed by: Dr. Matt J. Simpson, Consultant Anaesthetist
Produced by: Medical Illustration Services • MID code: 20231012_007/EP

LN005147
Publication date
10/2023
Review date
10/2026