



Many women have headaches after giving birth. If you had an epidural or spinal anesthetic for your labour or cesarean section, you may get a special type of headache called a **spinal headache** (also called a *post-dural puncture headache*). If you are experiencing confusion, drowsiness, or vomiting with your headache, this is a medical emergency and you should go to the hospital immediately.

What is a spinal headache?

The brain and spinal cord are surrounded by a sack of spinal fluid. During a spinal or epidural procedure, a small amount of spinal fluid may leak out of a hole that is made in this sack. While this leak usually isn't dangerous, if too much fluid leaks out, it may cause a spinal headache. About 1 in 100 people will get this type of headache after a spinal or epidural procedure.

What are the symptoms of a spinal headache & how long does it last?

A spinal headache usually starts 1 to 5 days after you have an epidural or spinal procedure. The headache usually gets worse when you sit up or stand and goes away when you lie down. It can be throbbing and severe in the front and back of the head. Some people also have neck pain, double vision, hearing loss, ringing in the ears, nausea, vomiting, and sensitivity to light or sound. For some people, the headaches go away on their own in a couple days, but for others, the headaches are more severe and will not go away without treatment.

How is the headache treated?

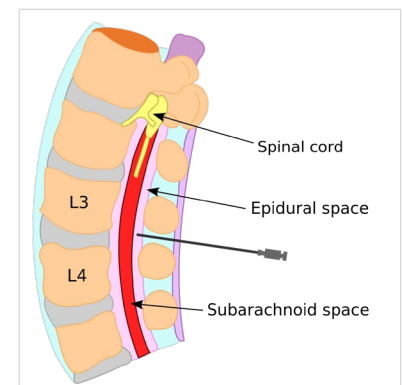
The spinal headache may go away with simple treatments such as rest, acetaminophen, ibuprofen, drinking water, or drinking caffeine. If these treatments don't work and you are struggling to take care of yourself or a newborn, we may offer you an **epidural blood patch** to patch the hole that is leaking spinal fluid. Very rarely (less than 1 in 100,000 cases), bleeding in the brain or vision changes can happen if the headache isn't treated.

What is an epidural blood patch?

An epidural blood patch is a procedure to treat spinal headaches. An anesthesiologist draws a small amount of blood from your arm and injects it into the lower part of your back using an epidural needle. This patches the hole that is leaking the fluid.

How is an epidural blood patch performed?

You sit up on the edge of the bed and we clean the skin on your lower back with an antibacterial cleaner. The anesthesiologist then injects local anesthetic (freezing) into your skin in the area where we will place the epidural blood patch. You will feel pressure as we place the epidural needle between the bones in your lower back to find the epidural space. After we clean your arm with antibacterial cleaner, we then draw the small amount of blood. Then we inject this blood in your back to patch the leaking hole. You may experience back pressure



when we inject the blood. After the procedure, you will immediately lie flat for 1-2 hours to allow the patch to form.



What are the side effects and risks of an epidural blood patch?

The most common side effect is mild pain or pressure in your back or buttock when we inject the blood. Some people experience significant backache and stiffness for a few days, but blood patches do not cause long-term back pain. In most women, an epidural blood patch will cure the spinal headache within 24 hours. About 2 in 10 women require a second patch for relief. Serious risks (infection, bleeding, nerve damage) are very rare. Accidentally creating another hole in the sack of fluid may occur, and this often means a second patch will be required.

What should I do after the procedure?

After receiving an epidural blood patch, you should avoid straining, bending over, picking up heavy objects, and coughing for 1 week. Do not lift anything heavier than 10 lbs during this time. If your headache comes back after you go home, please contact the anesthesia doctor. You may require a second epidural blood patch or other tests. Contact your doctor immediately if you experience fever, leg numbness or weakness, severe back pain, or new difficulty passing urine.

Who should not have this procedure?

If you have a fever, numbness or tingling in your legs, or other neurological symptoms you may not be able to have an epidural blood patch.

Are there other causes of severe headache after childbirth?

If you have a severe headache after giving birth, there are some causes that your doctor needs to consider in addition to spinal headache. Some of these headaches need immediate treatment. Please report any severe headache to your OB, GP, or Midwife. If you are experiencing confusion, drowsiness, or vomiting with your headache, this is a medical emergency and you should go to the hospital immediately.

Whom can I contact if I have more questions or concerns?

If your headache returns or if you have other questions or concerns about your procedure, an anesthesiologist is available 24 hours a day at BC Women's Hospital.

- Office hours (M-F 7:30 am – 3:30 pm) call 604-875-2158
- After hours call the anesthesiologist on-call 604-875-2424