Epidural injections are a type of injection into your spine, which may provide short-term pain relief if you have certain types of pain affecting your lower back and legs (this is also known as radicular pain).

If you’re considering having an epidural injection, you need to make a decision that’s right for you. This information is designed to help you decide whether you should have an epidural injection or not.

What are epidural injections?

An epidural is an injection that contains a steroid dissolved in a local anaesthetic. The injection is given into a gap called the epidural space, which surrounds your spinal cord. Local anaesthetic is used to block the pain temporarily, while steroids are used to reduce swelling and inflammation.

When are epidural injections used?

Your doctor will usually suggest trying other treatments before offering you an epidural injection, such as exercise, physiotherapy and painkillers. Doctors cannot say for sure how effective epidural injections are for back pain, as studies investigating their effects have had inconsistent results. However, there is some research to suggest they can sometimes help to manage pain affecting your back and legs, caused by certain conditions, such as:

- A slipped disc (herniated disc) – this is when one of the discs in your spine bulges
- Sciatica – this is when a nerve in your spine becomes compressed or irritated
- Spinal stenosis – this occurs when the space around your spinal cord narrows, causing pressure on your spinal cord

Epidural injections are usually given as part of a treatment plan incorporating other therapies, such as exercises and rehabilitation. It’s important to realise that, like other treatments for these conditions, not everyone gets pain relief from an epidural injection, and if you do, it will only be temporary. However, if it does help to relieve your pain, it may allow you to progress with physiotherapy or other rehabilitation to improve your symptoms in the long term.

You shouldn’t be offered an epidural injection for non-specific back pain. This is when your back becomes sore or stiff, but a particular cause of the pain can’t be identified. Epidural injections are unlikely to help your symptoms if you have this type of back pain.
What to expect after receiving an epidural injection

An epidural injection is usually done as a day-case procedure under local anaesthesia and X-ray. You may also be given sedation to help you relax and relieve any anxiety you may have. After receiving your epidural injection, you will be asked to rest for the remainder of the day. Your legs may feel numb or tingly because of the local anaesthetic, but this is only temporary. For this reason you shouldn’t drive a vehicle until the day after your injection.

Epidural injections may not work for everyone, but even if it is successful, it can take a number of days for the injection to work. You may even experience a temporary increase in pain several hours or days after your epidural injection. This may be caused by the pressure of the medicine injected into your back. Following your epidural injection, it may be helpful if you kept a pain diary. This can help to evaluate whether or not the injection has worked for you. It’s important to remember that you may not get any pain relief from having any epidural injection.

Pros and cons of epidural injections

As with any procedure, there are both benefits (pros) and certain risks (cons) associated with having an epidural for back pain. Everyone will rank these differently.

Pros

- An epidural injection may temporarily reduce your pain. This can improve your quality of life and make it easier to carry out your normal daily tasks in the short term.
- If the epidural injection helps to reduce your pain, you may find it easier to participate in physiotherapy or other rehabilitation. This may help to improve your existing back problem in the long term.

Cons

- Some people don’t get any pain relief from epidural injections.
- The pain relief you may get from an epidural injection is only temporary.
- If you have a bleeding disorder or certain types of allergies you doctor may suggest that you don’t have an epidural injection.
- There are a number of rare risks and complications linked to epidural injections. They include headaches, bleeding, infections, allergic reactions and nerve damage. You may not necessarily suffer from any of these, but it’s important to be aware of them when deciding on whether to have the injection.
Making your choice about epidural injections

Think about how important each of the issues are to you – this will vary from person to person.

- review the list of pros and cons.
- rank each of the pros and cons from zero to five, with five being the most important to you.
- add up the total value of the pros and cons.

The higher the total value should indicate what’s important to you.

You may then wish to discuss the outcome of this exercise with your doctor to help you in choosing the treatment that meets your individual values and preferences.

Questions to ask your doctor

always consider any further questions you want to ask your doctor before deciding whether to have an epidural spinal injection. Here are some questions you might want to ask your doctor.

- what are the alternatives to epidural injections?
- Should I try other treatments first before having an epidural?
- what should I expect to happen after I have had my injection?
- will I be able to exercise after the injection? what type of exercise is best to do?
- Should I be having physiotherapy or other rehabilitation after having my injection?
- How can I evaluate whether my epidural injection has worked?
- what else can I do to help relieve my pain?

For more suggestions of questions you can ask your doctor, see www.bupa.co.uk/individuals/health-information/directory/q/questions-for-doctor-treatment
sources

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this factsheet is based on reputable sources of medical evidence and has been reviewed by Bupa doctors.

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