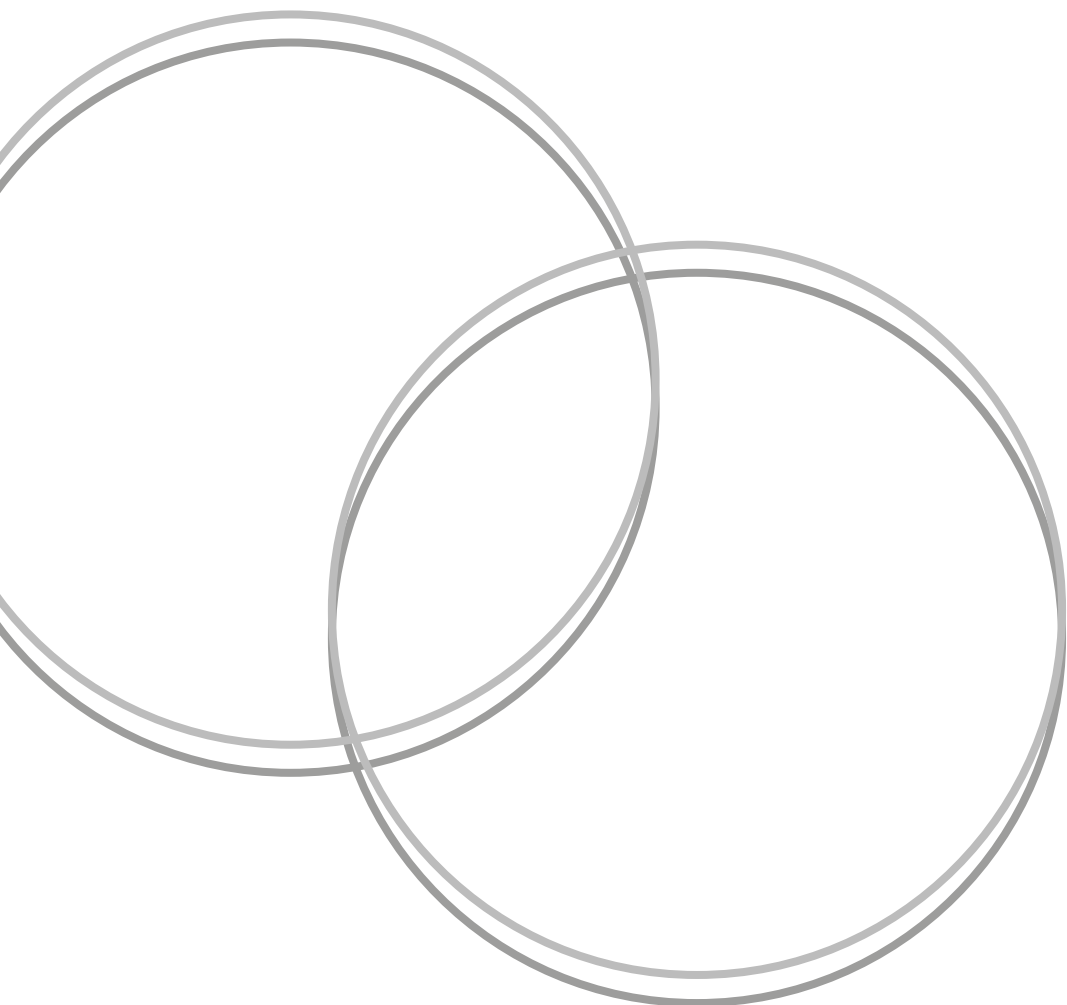




Oxford University Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Sterile Water Injections for Back Pain Relief in Labour

Information leaflet

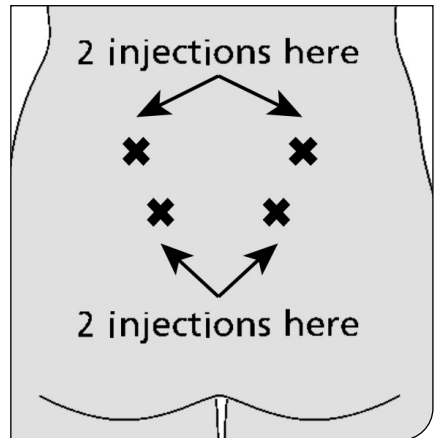


Why are sterile water injections offered?

Approximately 1 in 3 women and birthing people will experience lower back pain during labour. This is related to the baby's head pressing on the nerves as it moves down into the pelvis during labour.

In the majority of labours, women and birthing people experience contraction pain that comes and goes, allowing for a break and therefore relief in between contractions. However, some women and birthing people may experience a constant lower back pain as well as the contractions and so they don't experience that same relief.

If you experience back pain in labour one pain relief option you may choose is sterile water injections. They are specifically to help relieve back pain in labour, and do not aim to relieve discomfort caused by contractions. The procedure involves injecting a very small amount of sterile water, just under the skin in four places on the lower back in the area where the back pain is.



When the midwife administers the injections, it can feel very painful for about 30 seconds at the time the injections are being given and then the pain goes away. Shortly afterwards the back pain will usually ease. The injections are given to you during a contraction to distract from the pain of the injection and you can use gas and air as well if you wish. The injections do not have any side effects and the pain relief that you experience can last for up to three hours. Some people will give birth to their baby in this time and others may choose to have the injections again if the back pain returns.

How does it work?

The injections work by causing a localised reaction that stimulates the body's natural endorphins (pain relieving hormones) which may help relieve the back pain. A large international research trial that included women and birthing people in Oxfordshire has shown that up to 50 women in 100 received relief from pain for up to 90 minutes after having these injections¹.

What are the advantages of having these injections? These can be summarised as follows:

- Effects are often immediate.
- They provide significant pain relief.
- They have no effect on your level of consciousness.
- There are no side effects on you or your baby.
- There is no chance of an allergic reaction or drug interactions.
- The significant relief often relaxes a woman enough to enable her to birth her baby.
- They can be repeated as frequently and as often as women request them.
- You can have them in combination with gas and air, using the pool and/or diamorphine. You can have them at home, in a midwifery led unit or on Delivery Suite. Having the sterile water injections does not stop you from having an epidural if you decide after having the injections that you would like to have one.

What are the risks and possible side effects of having these injections?

- At the time they are given, the injections are very painful for approximately 20 to 40 seconds. However, the relief from back pain is often instant and should enable you to concentrate on the contractions rather than the intense back pain and the contractions.
- For a small number of women and birthing people it doesn't provide adequate pain relief (5 to 15 women in 100) which is the same as any method of pain relief.
- They only work for back pain and not for contraction pain. However, as the back pain can be constant and many women find it intolerable, then relief of back pain can be beneficial for helping you cope with the contractions. It allows you to rest and recover between the contractions.

What happens if I decide to have the injections?

If you experience back pain in labour, we will offer you the option of having these injections. We need to ask for your consent or permission before we carry out any procedure or treatment. Staff will explain the risks, benefits and alternatives if there are any before they ask for your consent. Remember that it is your choice whether you give your consent or not. If you have any doubts before you make a decision, please ask us for more information. We will do everything we can to help you make your choice.

Special note

National guidance supports the use of sterile water injections as a pain relief option for women in labour with back pain. You can find out more about sterile water injections for back pain relief in labour by visiting the National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE) website using the link provided in point 2 below. Sterile water is not licensed for use in this way but its safety has been reassured by clinical trials including the trial that has led to these injections being offered routinely for women and birthing people in labour with back pain. Details of how to find this trial are provided in point 1 below.

How can I find out more?

If you would like to know more about pain relief during labour, please ask your doctor or midwife. The research that has informed this change of practice is detailed below.

1. Lee N, Gao Y, Collins S, Martensson LB, Randall W, Rowe T-M et al (2020) Caesarean delivery rates and analgesia effectiveness following injections of sterile water for back pain in labour: A multicentre, randomised placebo trial.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eclinm.2020.100447>

2. NICE Guideline 235 (2023) Intrapartum Care
www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng235

If you have any questions, please ask your midwife.

Feedback

Your opinions and views are important to us. Please ask us about the NHS Friends and Family Test which gives you the opportunity to tell us what we did well and what we can do to improve. You can also have an informal conversation at any point if there is something you would like to ask or tell us about.

We would like to thank the Oxfordshire Maternity and Neonatal Voices Partnership for their help in the development of this leaflet.

Further information

If you would like an interpreter, please speak to the department where you are being seen.

Please also tell them if you would like this information in another format, such as:

- Easy Read
- large print
- braille
- audio
- electronic
- another language.

We have tried to make the information in this leaflet meet your needs. If it does not meet your individual needs or situation, please speak to your healthcare team. They are happy to help.

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