

What problems are associated with a blood patch?

There is a chance that another accidental dural puncture could occur.

A blood patch may not cure your headache. In about 60 – 70% of patients, a blood patch will take away the headache very quickly. In the others, although a blood patch may help initially, the headache soon returns.

'...when it finally worked, the blood patch was wonderful...'

A blood patch may cause local bruising and backache which lasts for a few days. Epidurals do not cause chronic long-term backache.

'...I was back to normal very quickly, but my back was stiff for quite a while...'

Difficulty in passing urine, severe pain or loss of sensation in your back or legs are not normal and you should contact your anaesthetist or another doctor immediately.

Infection or bleeding into your back are very rare complications of epidurals, spinals and blood patches.

There are alternative treatments, but none has been shown to be as effective as an epidural blood patch. You can discuss this with your anaesthetist.

This leaflet describes a special type of headache that can occur after having an epidural or spinal anaesthetic.

Many people have epidurals or spinals for surgery. Occasionally, a headache may develop following the procedure.

This leaflet explains the **causes, symptoms** and **treatment** of the headache.

Your anaesthetist will be happy to discuss this in greater detail and to answer any questions that you have.

For more information and help, please contact the anaesthetic department in your local hospital.



Booklets produced in the same series by the Royal College of Anaesthetists and Association of Anaesthetists are available at www.youranaesthetic.info

They include:

- **Epidurals for pain relief after surgery**
- **Your spinal anaesthetic**



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Headache after an epidural or spinal anaesthetic



What is special about the headache?

Headaches after surgery are common. However, after having an epidural, you have a 1 in 100 chance of developing a 'post dural puncture' headache.

This typically occurs between one day and one week after having an epidural. It is usually a severe headache (felt at the front or back of your head) which gets better when lying down and worse on sitting or standing. Along with the headache you may experience neck pain, sickness and a dislike of bright lights.

'...it was like the worst hangover in the world...'

If you have a spinal anaesthetic, the headache tends to be less severe (it depends on the size of the needle used).

Young patients and women during childbirth are especially likely to have post dural puncture headache.

What causes the headache?

Your brain and spinal cord are contained in a bag of fluid. The bag is called the dura and the fluid is called the cerebro-spinal fluid (CSF).

When an **epidural** is given, a needle is used to inject local anaesthetic just outside the dura. In about 1 in 100 patients, the needle passes through the dura accidentally.

When a **spinal** is given, a fine needle is inserted into the dura deliberately to inject local anaesthetic into the CSF.

If too much fluid leaks out through the hole in the dura, the pressure in the rest of the fluid is reduced. If you sit up, the pressure around your brain is reduced even more. This decreased pressure can cause the symptoms typical of a post dural puncture headache.

Some patients describe it as like a very bad migraine which is made worse when sitting or standing up.

What can be done about the headache?

The hole in the dura will usually mend itself in a number of weeks but it can take longer.

Lying flat and taking simple pain relieving drugs (such as paracetamol and ibuprofen) may help. You should **drink plenty of fluid** (some people find tea, coffee or cola especially helpful) and avoid lifting and straining.

A severe post dural puncture headache will often need to be treated by an '**epidural blood patch**'.

Being given a blood patch is like having an epidural and takes about half an hour. The anaesthetist will take your blood and inject it near the hole in the dura where it will clot, forming the blood patch. This will tend to plug the hole.

A blood patch will usually cure the headache within 24 hours. After this period, if you still have a headache, it may be worth repeating the blood patch once more. It is very rare to need more than two blood patches. Your anaesthetist will discuss this with you.

After a blood patch, we recommend that you lie flat in bed for 4 hours and do not lift anything heavy for at least two days.

You may need someone at home with you to help you with your daily activities.