

Remifentanil PCA Pain Relief for Labour

Information for Patients

Remifentanil PCA

The aim of this leaflet is to explain pain relief in labour using remifentanil patient-controlled analgesia (PCA). A remifentanil PCA is a method of strong pain relief which is available for you during your labour. It can be particularly helpful for women who cannot have an epidural.

What is remifentanil?

Remifentanil is a strong opioid painkiller similar to morphine. It is given intravenously (into your veins). It works very quickly and lasts only a short period of time (a few minutes). The side-effects of remifentanil are similar to morphine and include nausea, sleepiness and slowing of your breathing. However, as it does not build up in your body any side-effects generally wear off quickly. Although remifentanil can pass to your baby, the effects on your baby should be small and will wear off very quickly. As it is a similar drug to morphine, it is important that morphine and similar painkillers have not been given for at least 4 hours before a remifentanil PCA is started.



How is remifentanil given?

Before starting on remifentanil an anaesthetist will come and discuss it with you. Remifentanil is given by a special pump called a PCA (patient-controlled analgesia) device. This pump is attached by plastic tubing to a drip in your arm or hand. You are given a handset with a button on it; when you press the button the pump gives you a small dose of remifentanil. The pump is programmed to allow you to get one dose up to every 3 minutes. This is the lockout time. The lockout makes sure that you cannot give yourself too much remifentanil and is a safety feature of the technique. As labour progresses it may be necessary for the anaesthetist to adjust the dose you are given or the lockout time to improve your pain relief. The remifentanil PCA can be used throughout labour including during the pushing stage. Entonox (gas and air) and remifentanil can be used together.

What happens once the remifentanil PCA is set up?

Once your remifentanil PCA is connected it is necessary for you to wear a small plastic clip on your finger which monitors your heart rate and the oxygen level in your blood. Some women need to be given oxygen when using remifentanil; this is usually given by oxygen tubing which sits under your nose. The midwife will check your blood pressure and breathing regularly and will be present in your room continuously while you are connected to the PCA.

How effective is a remifentanil PCA?

Remifentanil PCA is as good a painkiller for labour as morphine. It is probably not as good as an epidural. As the drug takes about 30 seconds to reach its maximum effect it is best to press the button as soon as you feel the contraction starting. It can take some time and practice to get the most out of a remifentanil PCA. Unfortunately, not everyone finds it effective and it can take several adjustments to get it working as well as possible for each individual.

This leaflet was produced by the obstetric anaesthetists at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh. There are more excellent resources which you can read including those published by the Royal College of Obstetricians & Gynaecologists (RCOG) and LabourPains.com. Scan the QR codes to access these.



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