Controlling Your Pain: Continuous Intraspinal (Epidural/Intrathecal) Infusion

Pain control has been shown to improve recovery by aiding the natural healing process. You will be able to relax more easily and feel less anxious when you do not have fear of being in pain. This will help you move more and be more active, which aids in healing.

You are a full partner in managing your pain. After all, only you know how you really feel. Your doctors, nurses and therapists will depend on you to describe your pain in four ways:
• What hurts?
• When does it hurt?
• Where does it hurt?
• How much does it hurt?

You will be asked to rate your level of pain from 0 (no pain) to 10 (worst pain you can imagine). Be assured that pain medications (including narcotics) are not addictive when properly managed under a doctor’s care.

What is an intraspinal?
An intraspinal catheter is sometimes referred to as an “epidural” or “intrathecal.” It is a thin, flexible tube, about the size and thickness of fishing line, that is inserted into your back near the spinal cord and backbone. An anesthesiologist inserts the tube into your back using a needle. The needle is removed and the tube is brought over your shoulder, labeled and taped in place. Pain medicine can be given through the catheter close to the nerves that sense pain. You will receive pain medication prescribed by your doctor through a computerized pump. This pump is mounted on a pole near your bed. It is programmed by the nurse to give medication continuously.

What are the benefits of this method of pain relief?
When medications are given through this catheter, they act directly on the spinal cord. A very small amount of pain medicine is needed to provide the same pain relief as a larger dose given by mouth or IV. Narcotics such as morphine, which works well to relieve pain, are used. Sometimes local anesthetics (“numbing” drugs) are used. Using less medicine decreases side effects which can slow recovery. With an intraspinal catheter, you will be awake and alert, but able to sleep when you wish.

How often will I receive pain medication?
Your pain medication will be given continuously by a pump. It will be adjusted to provide the pain relief that is right for you. Medication will be available for “breakthrough” pain if you need it. Please let your nurse or doctor know if your pain is not controlled.

What if I have side effects?
The most common side effects from the pain medication can include:
• nausea
• feeling too sleepy
• itching
• confusion
• urinary retention

Sometimes numbness and weakness of the legs can occur, which will go away after the medication is reduced or stopped. Do not get up alone – your legs may be weak or feel heavy because of the medicine, causing you to fall. Be sure to have help getting out of bed or a chair. To prevent pulling on the catheter, slowly change positions when moving from lying down to sitting or standing.

Headaches can also occur. If you get a headache, it is important to rest and drink plenty of fluids. If your headache does not subside, please let your doctor or nurse know.

Treatment for side effects is available, so please let us know if you have any side effects.

Our goal is to help you control your pain so you can do activities that will help prevent complications and help you heal. Please tell your doctor or nurse if your pain is not under control.