

Sterile water injections for low back pain in labour

Information for pregnant people



Back pain in labour is quite common. This back pain can be due to the baby lying in a posterior ('back to back') position, and is often described as being continuous, whereas contraction pain comes and goes. Most people will find coping methods such as massage, TENS machines, water, or adopting different positions helpful in alleviating the pain.

However, for some, continuous low back pain can be more difficult to deal with than contraction pain; the methods listed above do not seem to be effective. If you are one of these people, and your labour is otherwise uncomplicated, you may be offered an alternative method of pain relief: **sterile water injections**.

What are sterile water injections?

Sterile water injections (SWI) are a very simple, safe procedure where tiny amounts of sterile water are injected under the skin at four points on the lower back. The injections are usually given by two midwives at the same time. The injections cause an intense stinging sensation, which lasts about 30 seconds, after which relief from the back pain is usually felt.

How do SWI work?

It is thought that SWI work because of something called the 'gate control theory', where the perception of deep pain from the back is blocked by the pain receptors in the skin being irritated by the sterile water injections.

SWI has been used in other countries for many years to treat painful conditions such as whiplash and kidney stones. SWI has been used for back pain in labour in Sweden, Canada, Asia and Australia since the 1980s, and the technique has been brought to the UK recently.

Studies suggest that SWI can be effective for moderate to severe back pain for around 80-90% of people using it. The pain-relieving effect can last from 30 minutes to two hours.

Although the research around SWI is limited, a number of studies have shown that parents and midwives are very positive about its benefits.

Are there any risks or complications?

There have been no reports of adverse side effects from SWI, apart from the initial stinging sensation when the injections are given. SWI does not affect the baby.

What are the benefits of SWI?

Some of the advantages of SWI are:

- rapid relief from back pain in labour
- it will not make you drowsy or limit your ability to stay mobile in labour
- it is a simple, quick procedure that can be repeated as needed
- SWI does not restrict your choice of other methods of pain relief
- no side-effects for baby

How is SWI given?

Your midwife will assess if SWI is suitable for you. SWI is most effective for moderate to severe lower back pain.

They will identify and mark four points on your lower back. Two pairs of injections of a tiny amount of sterile water will then be injected just beneath the skin. The injection can be given between or with contractions. This will leave a small blister at each site which will sting, like a wasp sting, for about 20-30 seconds. The stinging will then wear off. You should begin to feel relief from the back pain within one to three minutes.

It is very important that you do not rub or touch the injection sites for 30 minutes after, as that would interfere with the effectiveness of the injections.

Your midwife will monitor the effectiveness of your SWI treatment. You may have repeat injections if you need them, with or without other methods of pain relief.

Further information and advice can be obtained from:

Maidstone Birth Centre ☎ 01622 220161

Crowborough Birth Centre ☎ 01892 654080

Tunbridge Wells Triage ☎ 01892 633500

NHS 111 ☎ 111

NHS Choices online www.nhs.uk

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