West Hertfordshire Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust



A guide to...

Sterile water injections
For lower back pain in labour

Patient Information

Women and Children's Services
Maternity Department
Watford General Hospital

If you need this leaflet in another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call
01923 217 187 or email **westherts.pals@nhs.uk**

Language | Large Print | Braille | Audio

What are sterile water injections?

Sterile water injection is a very simple, safe procedure where tiny amounts of sterile water are injected under the skin at four points on the lower back to relieve lower back pain during labour.

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. If you are one of these people, and your labour is otherwise uncomplicated, you may be offered an this method of pain relief.

How do sterile water injections work ?

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

Studies suggest that sterile water injections 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 three hours.

Are there any risks or complications?

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

What are the benefits of sterile water injections?

- 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
- Sterile water injections do not restrict your choice of other methods of pain relief
- No side-effects for baby.

How are sterile water injections given?

Your midwife will assess if sterile water injections are suitable for you. Sterile water injections are most effective for moderate to severe lower back pain.

The injections are usually given by two midwives at the same time. The injection can be given between or with contractions.

The midwives 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. This will leave a small fluid filled pocket at each site which will sting, like a wasp sting, for about 20-30 seconds after which relief from the back pain is usually felt.

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.

Please speak with your midwives if you'd like further information on the use of sterile water injections.

Comments, suggestions and complaints

We are committed to providing a high standard of professional support and advise. To help us maintain this we welcomes any feedback that you have regarding your experiences of our service. Please share your comments, suggestions or complaints with a member of the team.

Alexander Birth Centre contact: 01923 217364

Maternity Triage Contact: 19232 17343

Alternatively you can contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). PALS provides advice and support to patients, their families and carers and can help to resolve any problems, concerns or complaints that you may have.

You can contact PALS on: 01923 217198

Watford General Hospital: 01923244366

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