

Remifentanil Patient Control Analgesia (PCA) for Women in Labour

The aim of this leaflet is to explain the use of Remifentanil Patient Controlled Analgesia (PCA) as a method of pain relief in labour. This is one of the methods of pain relief that we can offer in Delivery Suite at St. George's University Hospital.

If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.

What are the methods of pain relief in labour?

There are many ways of helping with pain in labour. Every labour is different, so it is good to understand what options are available. You may decide to try several different techniques during your labour.

Methods include:

- Relaxation techniques, massaging and breathing exercises.
- Use of a birthing pool.
- TENS (Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation) machine.
- 'Gas and air' (Entonox).
- Opioids – e.g. Pethidine injection, **Remifentanil PCA**.
- Epidural.

More information on these techniques is available on St. George's University Hospitals website and www.labourpains.com

What is remifentanil?

Remifentanil is a strong painkiller similar to pethidine. The main difference is that it is ultra-short acting. The pain relieving action comes on very quickly and wears off very quickly so it is given in repeated short bursts to follow the pattern of pain during labour. Remifentanil has been used to provide analgesia for many procedures since the early 2000s but only became popular for pain relief in labour over the last 10 years.

What is a PCA?

A PCA is a machine that is fixed to your bed. Remifentanil is locked inside the machine and is attached to your drip by a tube. You will be given a hand held button to press when you feel pain. When pressed a measured dose of remifentanil will go into your bloodstream and start to act almost instantly.

You, the patient, are in control of delivering your pain relief. Therefore, it can be timed with your contractions to help with the pain when it is at its strongest.

Who can use a remifentanil PCA?

Most patients can have a remifentanil PCA as an alternative to an epidural. However, the epidural is the best pain relief we can offer in labour, so we only recommend a remifentanil PCA to those women who can't have an epidural. Patients with allergies to morphine or related drugs are advised not to use remifentanil. In addition, patients with some heart conditions may not be able to have a remifentanil PCA.

Why haven't I heard more about remifentanil for labour before?

Some labour wards have not yet established a remifentanil PCA programme for their labouring women so it may not have been available to you or your friends during previous births. It is usually only discussed with those women who are unable to have an epidural for labour as it is still being used outside of its licence on labour ward.

What are the benefits of remifentanil PCA?

Many women find that it provides good pain relief during labour. The use of a button means that you are completely in control of your pain relief.

Are there any side effects of this drug for me and my baby?

Some patients find that remifentanil makes them feel dizzy, drowsy or nauseated. We can give you anti-sickness medication to help.

You will not be able to walk around once the PCA has been started. Your midwife will watch for excessive drowsiness. If you become too sleepy you will have to stop using the drug.

Remifentanil can also rarely cause slowing of the heart rate or a drop in blood pressure, which is why we will measure these frequently. There has been a small number of reported cases of mothers stopping breathing while receiving remifentanil.

In all these cases the mother has quickly responded to immediate treatment.

Some studies have shown that labouring women are quite happy with remifentanil pain relief for the first part of their labour but as the contractions intensify they can become less satisfied. You can request to use entonox ('gas and air') or continue your TENS machine along with your remifentanil PCA.

Remifentanil has been shown to be as safe for babies as diamorphine and pethidine. There have been no reported incidences of babies being slow to breathe in mothers using a remifentanil PCA but as a precaution we ask a paediatrician to be present at the birth of your baby.

What additional monitoring will I need while receiving a remifentanil PCA?

While receiving remifentanil you will need to have a midwife with you at all times. Your oxygen levels will be continuously measured with a probe on your finger (which is painless). You may be given supplementary oxygen via some tubing or a mask placed in front of your nose.

Your baby will be monitored continuously with a CTG monitor that is attached to a belt across your abdomen. The midwife will check your pulse and blood pressure at regular intervals until 15 minutes after you stop using the remifentanil PCA. You will not be allowed to have any food or drink (apart from sips of clear fluid) whilst using the remifentanil pump and you will be given anti-acid and anti-sickness medications regularly.

Contact us

Please feel to discuss your pain relief options with your midwives both in the community and in hospital. If you have specific questions about remifentanil during your labour on Ward 64 then the anaesthetic team will be happy to discuss these with you.

Contact details: Obstetric Anaesthetist on duty Telephone: 020 8672 1255, Bleep 6392
Delivery Suite Telephone: 020 8767 4654

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.stgeorges.nhs.uk

Additional services

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS can offer you on-the-spot advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or the care you have received. You can visit the PALS office between 9.30am and 4.30pm, Monday to Friday in the main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough wings (near the lift foyer).

Tel: 020 8725 2453 **Email:** pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk

NHS Choices

NHS Choices provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make decisions about your health.

Web: www.nhs.uk

NHS 111

You can call 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.

Tel: 111

AccessAble

You can download accessibility guides for all our services by searching 'St George's Hospital' on the AccessAble website (www.accessable.co.uk). The guides are designed to ensure everyone – including those with accessibility needs – can access our hospital and community sites with confidence.



Reference: OBS_RPCA_02 **Published:** July 2023 **Review date:** July 2025