

Department of Anaesthetics

Remifentanil Patient Control Analgesia for Pain Relief in Labour.

What is Remifentanil?

Remifentanil is a strong pain-relieving drug similar to Pethidine or Morphine. It is different from these drugs in that it is very short acting.

It has been used at this hospital since 2005 for pain relief in labour but its use had previously been restricted to women who could not have an epidural. We are now able to offer this form of pain relief to anyone who wants it providing they meet the criteria below.

Remifentanil is currently not licensed to be used for this purpose. The manufacturers of Remifentanil have not gone through the very involved and expensive process of getting a licence for its use in this situation. This does not mean it is unsafe and its use for this purpose is well established.

Who is it for?

To use Remifentanil Patient Controlled Analgesia (PCA) you must be a patient on Delivery Suite. It is not available on the Midwifery Led Birthing Unit (MLBU).

If this is your first pregnancy or you are having an induction then an epidural may be a better form of pain relief. If you are expecting twins then an epidural is preferred. Your Midwife or Anaesthetist can help guide you in this decision.

You cannot have Remifentanil if you have had Morphine or Pethidine within the last 4 hours.

You cannot have Remifentanil if your body mass index (BMI) is over 40.

Remifentanil may not be used in a birthing pool.

It may not be safe to use it if you have an allergy or sensitivity to Morphine-like drugs, or your Anaesthetist or Obstetrician advise against it.

How is it given?

It must be prescribed and set up by an Anaesthetist.

A small tube (cannula) is inserted into a vein in your arm or hand and attached to a PCA pump. With a PCA you are in control of your own pain relief. Pressing the button on the handset will deliver a small dose from the pump which will start to work within about 30 seconds. It will make you feel relaxed and sleepy. Its effects wear off within a few minutes so you will need to press the button each time you have a contraction.

The pump is programmed to give a safe amount of Remifentanil. For it to work best, you must press the button as soon as you feel you are starting to have a contraction. You can press the button as often as necessary.

Only you may press the button - this is an important safety feature.

Are there any side effects or problems with Remifentanil PCA?

Unlike an epidural, Remifentanil will not provide total pain relief. You will not be able to sleep as you have to stay awake to press the button. A recent study found that 20% of women needed to go on to have an epidural. In women who used Pethidine, 40% needed to have an epidural.

Common side effects can include feeling sick, itching, drowsiness and dizziness. These effects wear off very quickly when you stop using it.

50% of women find it slows their breathing which may cause lowered blood Oxygen levels. This can easily be treated by giving you additional Oxygen via a face mask or nasal cannula. Because of this your Oxygen levels must be monitored at all times using a small clip on one of your fingers. Your Midwife will also measure your levels of pain relief, drowsiness and blood pressure at regular intervals. A small number of women may have to stop using Remifentanil PCA due to excessive drowsiness or low Oxygen levels.

Your baby's heart rate will also be monitored continuously. Remifentanil does cross the placenta to the baby in a similar way to Pethidine and may cause your baby to be slow to breathe or to be drowsy at birth; unlike Pethidine this wears off very quickly.

You will still be able to breast feed if you have had Remifentanil.

This type of pain relief has now been used in large numbers of women in labour and has been shown to be safe for babies.

Questions and concerns:

Please feel free to discuss any queries that you may have with your Anaesthetist or Midwife.