

Pain Relief in Labour: Video transcript

Pain Relief Options – TENS Machine

Hello. My name is Robyn and I am a physiotherapist at the Women's and Children's Hospital.

Another pain relief option available during labour is a TENS machine. TENS stands for Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation. Stick-on electrodes to the woman's back get low voltage electrical impulses from a battery powered generator.

These impulses trigger normal skin touch sensors to send signals along the nerves from the skin.

The skin nerves end in the spinal cord at the same level as the nerves from the uterus. The theory is that the skin signals block some of the pain signals from the uterus and the vagina from reaching the brain. To achieve this effect the positioning of the electrode pads is important. The electrical impulses also cause the body to release enkephalins, which are morphine like substances, further reducing unwanted signals from reaching the brain.

Research has not been able to show that using a TENS machine reduces pain in labour but it can delay the need for other pain relief options. When women were asked about their experience using a TENS machine the majority were satisfied with it and would use it again.

To gain the maximum benefit from a TENS machine it should be trialled prior to the start of labour.

TENS machines are safe for the majority of people. It can be started at home before coming to hospital and continued throughout labour, even while walking around, unless an epidural is inserted. A small number of women are not allowed to use a TENS machine. These are women who have a cardiac pacemaker, metal near the pelvis, have had previous pelvic tumours or have some forms of epilepsy.

There is no evidence that it causes any harm to the baby.

The Women's and Children's Hospital hires out TENS machines on a first come, first serve basis at 37 weeks of pregnancy. A referral from a midwife, doctor or physiotherapist is required. Alternatively machines can be hired from a private company.



The physiotherapy department at the Women's and Children's Hospital run a one hour long group education session about the use of a TENS machine in labour. This is mandatory for anyone hiring a machine through the hospital and highly recommended for those who would like more information about using a TENS machine during labour or have hired a machine from a private company. People who are non-English speaking can arrange a consultation with an interpreter present.

For further information on how to hire a machine from this hospital or a list of private providers as well as details about how to make a booking for an education session please click on the link under 'Further Information'.