

Having an epidural 'does not lead to a longer labour'

By **Laura Donnelly** HEALTH EDITOR

HAVING an epidural to ease the pain of childbirth does not slow labour down, a new study has found.

The findings could encourage more women to have the injections, as many avoid the pain relief after some NHS warnings that it could delay delivery or increase the risk of complications.

Research on more than 400 first-time mothers found the spinal analgesia had no effect on the time it took for them to deliver their child.

Around one in three women in the UK are given an epidural.

NHS guidance suggests that the pain relief can slow down the second stage of labour, increasing the chance of a forceps birth, while some studies have suggested the injections, in common use since the Seventies, can add more than two hours to labour.

The new study, from Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Centre Boston, sug-

gests guidance should be re-examined. Prof Philip Hess, the senior author, said: "We found exchanging the epidural anaesthetic with a saline placebo made no difference in the duration of the second stage of labour.

"Not even the pain scores were statistically different between groups.

"Pain scores in women receiving the saline placebo increased over time, as would be expected."

The main outcome, the duration of the second stage of labour, was similar between both groups - about 52 minutes for women given active pain medication versus about 51 minutes for those given the saline solution, a difference of just 3.3 per cent.

An epidural involves a cocktail of drugs, delivered through a tube or catheter, being injected close to the nerves of the spine.

The study published in *Obstetrics & Gynecology* found the medication had no effect on how long labour lasted or normal natural childbirth rate.

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