

## **TENS Machine – What it does and the pros and cons of use during labour**

Ever wondered what a TENS machine is? When I was first pregnant with Aron, there was a lot of talk about using the TENS machine during labour but I wasn't sure what it was and the benefits of its use to combat labour pain. I decided to do some research and below is what I have found out about the TENS machine and the pros and cons of its use during labour.

### **What is a TENS machine?**

- TENS stands for Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulator
- Stimulates the nerves for therapeutic purposes.
- Delivers small electrical pulses to the body via electrodes placed on the skin – it is thought to help ease the pain
- Research trials have produced conflicting results as to how well they work and how much pain relief they give.
- Has a small box and three or four adhesive pads
- Usual to place two pads either side of the spine at bra-strap level and two either side of the spine, approximately level with your coccyx - Read through instructions on the packet before use.
- Once applied, you control the intensity and frequency of the electrical pulses according to how much pain you are in.

### **The theory**

The electrical pulses cause the body to release endorphins – natural chemicals to make you feel good. These positive signals to the brain block the slower moving pain messages coming from your cervix and womb.

### **Pros**

- Non-invasive and safe nerve stimulation to reduce pain, both acute and chronic
- Popular with people who have pain
- Can provide effective and drug-free pain relief throughout labour
- TENS is thought to have no effect on the baby
- They are portable
- Can be extremely effective for many women with no lasting side effects

### **Cons**

- Research evidence to support TENS is not strong
- Takes an hour for body to start producing endorphins, so you should start using it earlier on in your labour, even at home before visiting the labour ward.
- Does not work for everyone
- Provides no benefit for others
- You cannot use the TENS in a birthing pool
- Has to be removed for electric monitoring of baby's heart. This will stop the release of endorphins and therefore impact pain relief

- Greatest disadvantage is that it prevents your back from being massaged, which for many is one of the most effective forms of pain relief and comfort in labour. [However, I (Georgie) found that my husband could very successfully use acupressure on my lower back during three labours with a tens machine on. So I'm not sure I entirely agree with this 'con'.]

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