



## USING TENS AS PAIN RELIEF IN LABOUR

### WHAT IS TENS?

TENS is an acronym for Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation. It is commonly used by Physiotherapists as part of the treatment of musculoskeletal pain such as low back pain. TENS is a non-invasive, self-controlled form of pain relief with no known side effects for mother or baby. Using TENS puts you in immediate control of your own pain relief.

The TENS unit is a small battery operated machine about as big as a deck of cards. Electrodes are connected to the TENS unit via cords. The electrodes are positioned on specific areas and an electrical stimulation applied. TENS feels like a buzzing or vibrating sensation. It should be a pleasant tingling sensation, it should never be painful.

An obstetric TENS unit is designed for use in labour. It has a burst button which you press as a contraction starts, to increase the stimulation provided by the TENS unit. Standard TENS units do not have a burst button.

### HOW DOES IT WORK?

TENS is thought to work via a number of mechanisms including the 'Pain Gate', release of the body's own natural pain killers and by helping distract you from the pain of contractions.

The 'Pain Gate Control' theory is where stimulation of large diameter nerve fibres by the tingling of the TENS is thought to inhibit pain messages carried on smaller diameter nerve fibres. The tingling sensation of the TENS 'takes up space' in the spinal cord and reduces the amount of pain messages traveling to the brain via the spinal cord. The body thereby focuses on the tingling of the TENS rather than the pain messages. In this way the TENS reduces the perception of pain felt by the user. It is a similar process to the way you rub your arm if you bump it to make it feel better, both utilize the 'pain gate'.

TENS may also trigger the release of the body's natural pain inhibitors – endorphin and enkephalin.

TENS also provides a distraction from your pain during labour. When a contraction starts, using the burst button to increase the TENS stimulation gives you a focus other than pain to help get through the contraction.

### HOW DO I USE TENS IN LABOUR?

For best results in labour you should be familiar with the TENS before labour begins. You don't want to be learning how to use a TENS unit between contractions! We recommend you pick up your Obstetric TENS unit in your 38<sup>th</sup> week, or earlier if your Obstetrician thinks the baby is coming early. You can practice positioning the electrodes and using the TENS before you start labour quite safely and it makes using TENS in labour much easier if you are familiar with it.

When your labour begins you position 2 sets of electrodes on your back. The upper electrodes are positioned between T10 and L1, and the lower ones between S2 and S4. TENS is most effective if started as early as possible in labour. The TENS is set to tingle at a comfortable baseline level between contractions and a boost button is used to increase stimulation during contractions.

As soon as you feel a contraction start, you press the burst button. This changes the frequency of the stimulation and increases the sensation felt. As the labour progresses you will need to gradually turn up the TENS machine. NB: Always turn up the machine while it is at its more intense mode, rather than at baseline.

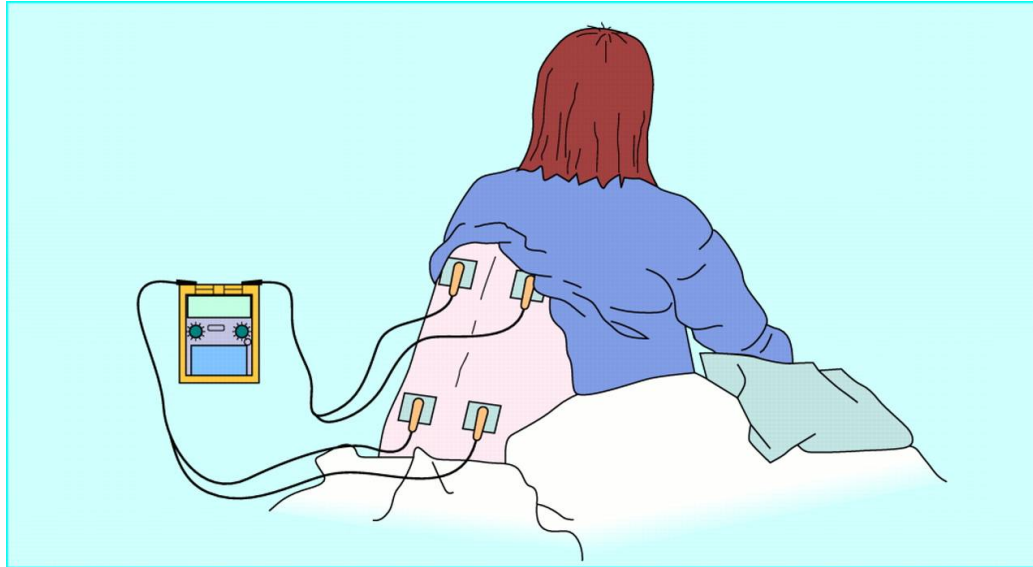
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Focus on the sensation of the TENS during the contraction. Use the tingling sensation to focus on and get you through the contraction. Try not to focus on the pain, focus on the TENS sensation instead.

TENS can be used in conjunction with gas and pethidine. TENS becomes redundant if an epidural is performed.



### **HOW WELL DOES IT WORK?**

TENS is useful as a form of pain relief in labour, however it does not eliminate pain. Labour pain is generally stronger than any pain previously experienced. TENS can help women cope with this pain rather than fully relieve it.

For best results, women need to be fully educated in its use and be familiar with the TENS unit.

### **CONTRAINDICATIONS**

Some people can't use TENS. If you have any of the following TENS is not suitable for you to use:

- High risk pregnancy
- Anticipated high risk delivery
- Metal implanted in the area
- Pacemaker

The TENS unit must be removed if you go into the spa bath as it can not be used under water. If you have an epidural the TENS unit is removed.

### **HOW DO I GET A TENS UNIT?**

Call The Physiotherapy Clinic on 02 9387 1011 to make an appointment to have one of our Physiotherapists teach you how to use a TENS unit. Try to pick up your TENS unit early enough to give yourself a chance to practice using it before you go into labour.

This information sheet is intended as general information only and is no substitute for an individual consultation with a Physiotherapist.

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