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7 Medical Errors During Labor That Can Cause Birth Injuries

26 May 2026 | Reports/white papers

Labor and delivery are high-risk moments where quick decisions and proper monitoring can make a lifelong difference.

While many births go smoothly, preventable medical errors still occur and can lead to serious injuries for both the baby and the mother. Understanding where things go wrong helps families recognize warning signs and take action when needed.

Failure to Monitor Fetal Distress Properly

One of the most critical responsibilities during labor is tracking the baby's heart rate. Abnormal patterns often signal oxygen deprivation, which can lead to brain damage if not addressed quickly. Continuous fetal monitoring should identify signs like prolonged decelerations or irregular rhythms.

If these are missed or ignored, doctors may delay necessary interventions such as oxygen support or emergency delivery. Even a delay of minutes can increase the risk of conditions like hypoxic-ischemic encephalopathy (HIE). You can reach out to the Birth Injury Justice Center if you feel like your child has been a victim of any of these situations.

Delayed Emergency C-Section

When complications arise, timing matters. A delayed cesarean section can lead to reduced oxygen supply, physical trauma, or even stillbirth. Hospitals are expected to act within a "decision-to-incision" window, typically around 30 minutes in emergencies.

Concrete example: If a baby shows signs of distress for an extended period and the team waits too long to perform a C-section, the resulting oxygen deprivation can cause permanent neurological damage.

Misuse of Forceps or Vacuum Extraction

Assisted delivery tools can be helpful, but improper use is a known cause of injury. Excessive force or incorrect positioning can result in:

- Skull fractures
- Brain bleeding
- Facial nerve damage
- Brachial plexus injuries (affecting arm movement)

These tools should only be used when medically necessary and by trained professionals. Misjudging the baby's position or applying repeated force increases the risk significantly.

Failure to Manage Shoulder Dystocia

Shoulder dystocia occurs when the baby's shoulder gets stuck behind the mother's pelvic bone. This is an emergency that requires specific maneuvers to safely deliver the baby.

If handled incorrectly, it can cause brachial plexus injuries, including Erb's palsy. A common error is pulling too hard on the baby's head instead of using proper techniques like repositioning the mother or applying controlled pressure. Training and quick action are critical here.

Improper Use of Labor-Inducing Drugs

Medications like oxytocin (Pitocin) can help induce or speed up labor, but incorrect dosing can cause overly strong or frequent contractions. This can reduce blood flow and oxygen to the baby. Clear risks include:

- Uterine rupture
- Fetal distress
- Placental abruption

Hospitals should carefully monitor contraction patterns and adjust medication accordingly.

Failure to Diagnose Maternal Infections

Infections during labor, such as chorioamnionitis, can pass to the baby and cause severe complications, including brain injury or sepsis. Symptoms like fever, rapid heart rate, or abnormal discharge should trigger immediate investigation.

If medical staff overlook these signs or delay antibiotics, the infection can escalate quickly. Early diagnosis and treatment are straightforward steps that can prevent serious harm.

Poor Communication Between Medical Staff

Labor often involves multiple professionals, such as nurses, obstetricians, and anesthesiologists. When communication breaks down, critical information can be missed. For example, if a nurse notices abnormal fetal heart patterns but fails to escalate the issue to the doctor clearly, or a shift change happens without properly handing over patient details.

These gaps can delay decisions and increase risk. Hospitals must follow structured communication protocols, especially during emergencies. When these systems fail, patients suffer the consequences.

Endnote

Most birth injuries linked to these errors are preventable with proper training, monitoring, and timely decision-making. For families, it’s important to understand that not every complication is unavoidable. If something feels wrong during labor, delays, lack of response, or unclear communication, it may be worth reviewing the case with a medical or legal expert. Clear documentation, medical records, and early evaluation can make a significant difference in understanding what happened and what steps to take next.