

Coping Strategies for Labor

Labor is hard work! It may even be the hardest work a woman ever experiences. However, this hard work has a purpose and a wonderful end result... your baby!

Because every labor is a different experience, women vary in the coping strategies and pain management techniques they use. For some women, breathing and relaxation techniques along with comfort measures are all they need. Other women may want or need more relief. Pain medications and regional anesthesia (epidural) are also available.

Support in Labor

The support you receive in labor can have a dramatic effect on your birth experience. With the presence of an active support person, women can experience less pain, fewer complications, and shorter labors.

Your Labor Partner

Women may choose husbands, sisters, mothers, or close friends as support people during labor. Some women have more than one person for support in labor. Labor partners provide physical and emotional support. Their gentle but firm touch and words of encouragement are invaluable.

Doula

A doula is a woman trained and experienced in childbirth. Some women find that having an experienced labor support person assisting them in labor, along with their partner, is very satisfying. A doula supports and guides the laboring mother and her partner throughout the entire labor. She provides continuous physical, emotional and informational support. The support she provides helps promote a memorable and positive birth experience.

A doula is self-employed and hired by the mother to accompany her during labor. The fee she charges varies according to her experience and services. Insurance companies do not typically cover the cost of a doula but call your insurance provider to verify.

Relaxation Techniques

Relaxation is the release of tension from the mind and body through conscious effort. By reducing muscle tension, you allow your body to work naturally.

During labor, relaxation will provide you with the following benefits.

- Conserve energy and reduce fatigue
- Calm your mind and reduce stress
- Reduce pain

Relaxation does not come easily to all people, but with practice anyone can learn to consciously relax. Practice several different relaxation techniques so that you can find which one works best for you.

After labor and delivery, relaxation is a tool that will help you gain control over a variety of stressful situations, such as when the baby cries inconsolably.

Tips for Mastering Relaxation Skills

- Choose a quiet environment.
- Turn on soft music, if desired.
- Assume a comfortable position, with pillows to support you. Try a variety of positions; sitting, semi-reclining, side-lying.
- Use slow, deep abdominal breathing. Feel the coolness of the air as you breathe in, feel the tension carried away as you breathe out.
- Become aware of areas of tension in your body and concentrate on relaxing.

With any of these techniques, the more you practice, the better they will work when you really need them.

Progressive Relaxation

Beginning with your head or your feet, relax one muscle group at a time, moving toward the other end of your body. If you have trouble isolating the muscles, first tense each group for a few seconds, then release and feel the tension ebb away. Come back to your jaw now and then, because if your jaw is loose, you are too.

Touch Relaxation

This is similar to progressive relaxation, but your cue for releasing each muscle group is when your partner presses, strokes or massages in tiny circles. He should apply pressure for five to 10 seconds, then move on to the next spot. Practice together until your response to the touch becomes automatic.

Tips for Practicing Touch Relaxation Skills

Pick a private, quiet place to practice touch relaxation. Ask your partner to begin at your head and work down.

- Temples
 - Press temples gently but firmly with fingertips.
- Base of skull
 - Press firmly with thumbs or fingertips on either side of the spine, just below the skull.
- Shoulders
 - Use firm fingertip pressure on top of the shoulders, midway between the neck and arms.
- Back
 - Rest hands on shoulder blades and move thumbs to either side of the spine. Apply pressure for three to five seconds and then move thumbs down an inch. Repeat this step every inch to the level of the waist, then move outward, applying pressure every inch along the hip bones.
- Arms
 - Beginning at the shoulder, firmly press massage points that extend down the top of the arms to within about two inches of the wrists.
- Hands
 - Use thumbs to apply pressure to the three massage points on the palms of the hands-- the center of the base of the hands (near the wrists), the center of the palms and the base of the middle finger.
- Legs
 - Apply thumb pressure in a firm, stroking action down the middle of the backs of the thighs and lower legs. Avoid pressure to the areas behind the knees.
- Feet
 - Apply firm pressure with the thumbs, beginning at the heel and moving toward the toes.

Labor Partner

When doing any touch or relaxation techniques, you should use lotion or powder to prevent any drag on the skin. Also, never take both hands off the laboring mother at once. This tends to disrupt the relaxed state. If you reach for that cold wash rag, keep some type of contact with her.

Breathing Techniques

Many relaxation exercises involve breathing techniques. This approach goes back to the old principle that if something hurts, think about something else to take your mind off it. By focusing on your breathing, your concentration is focused away from pain and anxiety. You relax, and you conserve energy. You feel like you are in control.

Cleansing Breath

Childbirth educators teach expectant mothers to take a deep breath to begin and end each contraction. Inhale through your nose, imagining cool, pure air. Exhale slowly through your mouth, imagining tension blowing away. The deep breath signals to everyone in the room that a contraction is beginning or ending and is a cue for your body to relax.

Start with the first breathing technique and use it as long as it works for you, then move on to the next level.

Slow-Pace Breathing

This is the type of breathing you use when you are relaxed or sleeping. Take in slow, deep breaths through your nose, and exhale through your mouth at about half the speed of your normal rate. If you like, repeat a phrase over and over with the breathing: "I am" (inhale) "relaxed" (exhale). Or count "in one-two-three, out one-two-three." Or breathe in rhythm with walking or rocking.

Modified-Pace Breathing

Breathe faster than your normal rate but shallowly enough to prevent hyperventilation: "In one-two, out one-two, in one-two, out one-two." Keep your body, particularly your jaw, relaxed. Concentrate on the rhythm, which may be faster at the height of the contraction, then slower as it fades.

Pattern-Pace Breathing

Use this type near the end of labor, or at the height of strong contractions. The rate is a little faster than normal, as with the modified-pace breathing, but now you use a pant-blow rhythm, "ha-ha-ha-hoo" or "hee-hee-hee-hoo," that forces you to focus on the breathing rather than the pain. Repeat this pattern over and over again. Start out slowly, increase the speed as each contraction peaks, and decrease it as it fades. Keep in mind that when you increase the rate, the breathing should become shallower so that you don't hyperventilate--if your hands or feet tingle, slow down. There is some concern that hyperventilation can decrease oxygen supply to the baby. If moaning or making other noises helps, go ahead. Keep your eyes open and focused and your muscles relaxed.

- It is important for you to know that you need to breathe normally between contractions. Using breathing techniques throughout your whole labor, contractions or no contractions, will exhaust you within the first hour of your labor.
- Remember, the choice you make as to the type of breathing you use does not relate to the specific phase of labor you are in or how far dilated you are. Use the technique that will best help you manage the discomfort of your labor.

Labor Partner

- Do not eat any onions or other type of spicy foods that day, especially when you are helping her breathe. Having some breath mints is helpful!

Other Comfort Techniques Massage and Touch

Massage and touch have been proven to be very healing, and in labor, very beneficial in reducing pain sensations. Touch soothes the body through simple hand-holding, gentle stroking of the arms, legs, or abdomen. Massage helps muscles relax and causes the brain to release endorphins that are "morphine-like." These pain relieving chemicals give us a sense of well-being.

With massage and touch, more endorphins can be released as long as you stay as relaxed as possible. Tension and stress tend to cancel out the endorphins with catecholamines. These are the chemicals that deal with the "fight or flight" response. They make our heart beat faster, breathing more rapid, and muscles more tense. In labor, we want all the morphine-like chemicals we can get! Good sensations, like touch and massage, tend to travel the nerve paths faster than do pain sensations. Pain researchers believe that there are "gates" that close after a good sensation travels the nerve paths to our brains.

Your partner can massage you while you are in practically any position: standing, sitting, kneeling, or lying on your side.

Labor Partner

- Make sure your touch is firm but gentle. She cannot stand a light or tickling touch.
- Not everyone likes to be touched during labor. If she does not want to be touched, you can still provide verbal support.

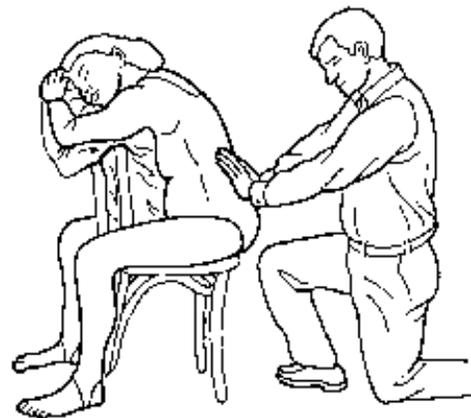
Massage for Back Labor

For some women the pain of labor contractions is felt mainly in the lower back. Back labor may be intense and interferes with the ability to relax. The cause of back labor is usually due to the position of the baby's head facing upward. This position causes pressure on the mother's pelvis and tailbone.

Many women want massage in the form of counter-pressure. During each contraction, the labor partner applies firm pressure to the small of the back. Many women find this counter-pressure very effective along with position changes.

Labor Partner - Here are some other back massage techniques you might try.

1. Begin on the lower back, with hands on either side of the spine, and slowly move up to the shoulders. Slide hands across the shoulders, then down along the sides of the back. Gradually increase pressure, based on feedback from the laboring mother.
2. Move your hands to the lower back. With fingers pointing outward and wrists about an inch apart, inhale. As you exhale, gently press down. Inhale again and move the hands slightly lower on the back; repeat, pressing with the exhale.
3. Place your thumbs about " to either side of the spine, at the small of the back. Press firmly, making small, slow, circular motions. Slowly move up the back to the neck. Then place your index fingers at either side of the spine and draw a firm line down the back to the buttocks.
4. Repeat.



Focal Point and Concentration

Focusing and concentrating all our attention on one thing allows distracting thoughts and images to simply pass by. Any point of focus can work, a word or sound, a phrase, a photograph of an older child, or a meaningful object. This is an effective way of shutting out other concerns. Bring an item along with you to the hospital that you feel will help you in focusing.

Music

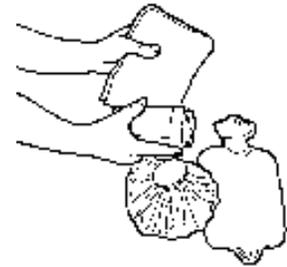
Music aids in relaxation by drowning out any distractions taking place down the hall or outside your door. It helps to soothe your environment. Use music that is comforting to you. Use the music that you used when practicing your relaxation techniques. Using music you love is particularly effective.

Visualization or Guided Imagery

The technique of visualization, or using your imagination, does not work for everyone but could be of great assistance to you. Using visualization or guided imagery involves focusing on a mental image, e.g. a place in your mind that is special to you. It could be a garden filled with a multitude of flowers. Use your senses; smell the scents, see the colors, and hear the birds. Share your special place with your labor partner, and they may be able to walk you through your technique.

Warm Water

Warmth is extremely effective in reducing pain and creating relaxation. A warm bath, shower or Jacuzzi bath can be very effective for relaxation. Some doctors prefer that you use only a warm shower if your amniotic sac has ruptured. A hot water bottle, heating pad or compresses to your lower back can also be effective.



Changing Positions

Staying in one position can increase tension. Moving regularly can significantly reduce pain. Listen to your body to find what positions feel good to you. Changing positions helps the baby find the best way to fit through your pelvis. Try to find a position that uses gravity and opens your pelvis. You may want to try the following positions:

- Standing or walking
- Squatting
- Kneeling in an upright position
- Sitting and rocking
- Getting on hands and knees
- Lying on your side



During each stage of labor, experiment until you find a position that works best for you.

Pressure Points

If you think about the last time you had a headache, you may have applied pressure to your temples with your fingertips. You may have moved them in a circular motion, and it actually made your head feel better. If you have a stressful day, you may rub your palms together. Somehow our bodies know how to naturally deal with stress or pain. Applying pressure to certain areas of the body has been proven to decrease stress, tension and pain sensation.

A good example is with back labor. If you experience back labor, you will feel your contractions in the small of your back. If the labor partner applies counter pressure in the lower back with a closed fist or heel of their hand (laboring mom will tell you exactly where to apply pressure and how hard to push) it helps tremendously in reducing the discomfort of back labor. Cold and heat can also be alternatives to pressure.

Birthing Ball

The birthing ball looks like a large exercise ball. In labor, you can sit on it rocking the pelvis rhythmically; lean on it either in bed or out of bed. When using the birthing ball your support person should always have one hand on you to ensure your safety.