

# COPING TECHNIQUES TO DEAL WITH LABOR

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There are many different ways to help you cope with the stress and pain of labor. During labor you can help yourself immensely by using a variety of comfort measures such as music, position changes, massage, relaxation techniques and breathing. These techniques cannot guarantee a pain-free childbirth, but they can help reduce pain and stress, promote labor progress and give you more control over the experience. These techniques can be used alone or with pain medication. It is important to remember each birth experience is different; the length and discomfort level of each birth experience will vary. Different women will have different coping techniques that work the best for them; the following relaxation and breathing techniques can be individualized to find the ones which will work best for you.

## MUSIC TO SOOTHE YOUR LABOR

Music has been an integral part of healing rituals all over the world since the beginning of recorded history. In this century, scientists have found that dental and surgical patients listening to music require less anesthesia and recover faster than patients who have nothing to listen to but the sounds of the medical procedures being performed on them. Women in labor also experience less pain from their contractions when they are listening to music.

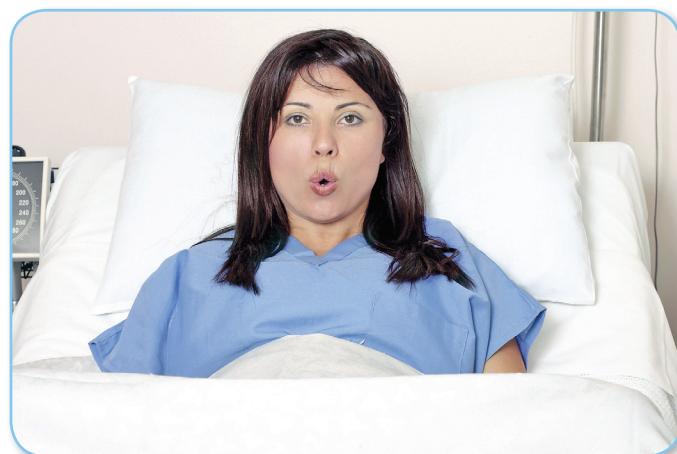
The three main benefits of using music for labor are:

1. Music will calm your physiological response to stress, allowing you to relax and letting labor happen more easily.
2. The rhythm of the music can cue your breathing, slowing you down to keep you calm.
3. Focusing your attention on the music will take your concentration away from sounds that may be anxiety provoking.

The right music for your labor can be anything you enjoy. Practice your relaxation and breathing to the music before your labor begins. Try using music for meditation. Listen to the music. Let each measure flow through your whole body, relaxing every muscle and joint. Feel yourself floating along with the melody, relaxing more and more. Focus on the images suggested by the music.

In labor, use a device with headphones, increasing or decreasing the volume as you prefer, perhaps louder when a contraction begins, and very low between contractions. Or you may want to leave the music on for everyone in the room to enjoy. Music can relax your partner and birth attendants, too!

- Rhythmic body motions to go along with the music can add to your attention focus and provide even more pain relief. Tapping to the rhythm can help keep your attention off the pain.
- You can also concentrate on your own sounds to help you relax. Singing, moaning, or groaning, can relieve tension. Sounds that won't be helpful to you are high-pitched screams because these sounds will make you more tense.



## COMFORT POSITIONS FOR PREGNANCY & LABOR

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Sit in a comfortable chair or rocking chair with your feet up on a stool. Put a pillow behind your back and under your arms and knees. You can still be hooked up to a monitor and IV.



To be comfortable in bed sitting up place pillows behind your back and under your knees to help your legs relax. Also you can put a pillow under your arms to help your shoulders and arms relax. Use lots of pillows.





When lying on your side in bed, place one or two pillows between your knees with your legs slightly bent. Wedge another pillow behind your back and place one under your head and arms.

## MORE POSITIONS YOU MAY WANT TO TRY

- For back pain try standing up and leaning against the wall with your feet placed about a foot away from the wall. Press your waist against the wall.
- To help with back pain you can try kneeling on all fours while arching your back like an angry cat.
- Another good position for back pain is sitting backwards in a narrow chair. Use 2 or 3 pillows to rest your arms and head on. This helps take the weight of the baby off your back and puts you in a great position for your partner to rub your back.
- You may want to try sitting or standing in a warm shower. This can be a wonderful way to promote relaxation.
- Some women find it comforting to rock back and forth or from side to side while sitting or standing. If standing, you can face your partner and lean your chest on theirs or you can lean your back against your labor partners chest. Both are good for rocking slowly.
- Do not lie flat on your back. This is not comfortable during labor, and is not good for circulation to your baby.
- Change your position at least every half hour. If you stay in one position too long it can make your muscles get sore. Get up and walk if you can. This can make labor shorter and easier to handle.
- The peanut ball is a low-risk, low-cost nursing intervention that promotes positive labor outcomes and reduces the duration of the delivery process when used with an epidural. The peanut ball is similar to an exercise ball except shaped like a peanut. The peanut ball is most commonly used when mom needs to remain in the bed, whether because of epidural use, complications, or simply because mom is exhausted. To learn more about the peanut ball go to <http://www.scienceandsensibility.org/peanut-balls-for-labor/>

## COMFORT POSITIONS FOR PREGNANCY & LABOR



Use the birthing ball to help position yourself.



Double hip squeeze.



Sitting backwards on a hard chair is also a good position for a back rub.



Lunging can increase the size of the bony pelvis.

## COMFORT POSITIONS FOR PREGNANCY & LABOR

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MASSAGE CAN HELP RELIEVE TENSION AND CAN HELP  
REDUCE THE DISCOMFORT OF LABOR



# MASSAGE

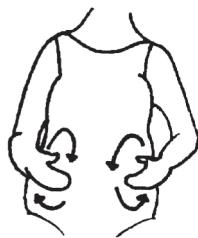
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Touch and massage help relieve tension and reduce pain. Your labor partner can help with this. During labor some women relax well and find massage helpful, others do not want to be touched. Some women find touch relaxing early in labor and irritating later. Labor partners need to be sensitive to her needs and not feel rejected if she doesn't want to be touched. Try just holding her hand. Massage can be done on bare skin or over clothing. Try using lotion, powder or massage oil to help reduce friction.

## TYPES OF MASSAGE

**EFFLEURAGE** is a light to firm stroking that can be done on your abdomen, arms, legs or back.

You can perform this on your abdomen yourself. This can be done on bare skin or over clothing. Many women do this by placing their hands on their lower abdomen, bringing them up their sides and back down the middle. They are massaging in two small circles.



Your labor partner can do this massage on your abdomen.



**EFFLEURAGE STROKING** is a long continuous stroke which can be done on arms, legs or back by your labor partner. Usually firm pressure feels good but start with light pressure and increase it according to the mother's feedback.

For arms, begin at one shoulder, place both hands on either side of her arm and stroke down her arm all the way to her fingers. Mothers can try exhaling as the labor partner strokes down the arm. Repeat on the other arm.



On her legs start on one side, place your hands on either side of her upper thigh and stroke down the leg to her toes, again suggest she exhale as you stroke down her leg. Repeat on other leg.

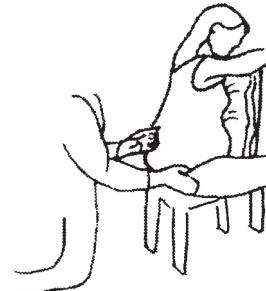


On her back you can massage in circles, covering her entire back or stroke down on either side of her spine continuously.



**SQUEEZING AND KNEADING** the muscles of the shoulders, arms, hands, back, legs and feet is another technique for massage. Begin kneading each of the muscle groups by gently but firmly squeezing them, using slow, rhythmic strokes, as though you were kneading clay. Use your whole hand and not just the fingers, this can cause an unpleasant pinching effect. Get feedback as to how much pressure the mother likes.

**COUNTERPRESSURE** on the lower back can help give relief if she is experiencing back labor. You can press with your fist or the palm of your hand on her lower back. You can just apply pressure or move your hand in a small circle, picking up her skin instead of sliding over it. This massage can be done in a variety of positions such as sitting backwards in a chair, kneeling on hands and knees or laying on her side.



**TOUCH RELAXATION** is responding to your labor partner's touch by relaxing or releasing tense muscles. This can be done with gentle pressure or stroking. Practice will condition the mother to relax to touch during labor and will teach the labor partner how to touch, stroke, massage, and press in the most effective ways. You can start by tensing and releasing to your labor partners touch. After you have mastered contracting and releasing to touch, stop contracting first and see if you can release tension as your partner uses various massage techniques.

Contract forehead.....release as your partner strokes across forehead with fingers. Try placing two fingers between her eyebrows and suggest she feel the space grow wider.

Clench jaw.....release to pressure of palms on jaw. Your labor partner can cradle your jaw in their hands, then suggest she feel her jaw drop down into their hands.

Contract shoulders.....release to kneading action or place one hand on each shoulder and when she exhales gently press downward, suggesting she allow her shoulders to drop downward.

Contract arm.....release arm as your partner strokes down with both hands encircling your arm. Repeat on other side.

Contract back.....release to firm yet gentle massage.

Contract abdominal muscles.....release to effleurage. As labor intensifies she may find anything touching her abdomen irritating.

Contract leg .....release to long stroking pressure from your partners hands, encircling your legs stroking down to your feet. Repeat on other side.

Adapted from Kathy Cain, Partners in Birth, 1990, Warner Books.

**VISUALIZATION** Training the mind to create soothing images helps with relaxation and distraction. Examples include imagining yourself in relaxing places such as a beach, under a shade tree or watching a beautiful sunset. Try to imagine everything about this place from what you see, to what sounds you would hear and possibly what odors you might smell. Your labor partner can help if they've been to this place with you by describing all the details.

**RELAXATION** is the art of releasing muscle tension. This ability is easier for some people than it is for others. Relaxation during labor will help you feel less pain and stay more comfortable. The goal is to make breathing and relaxation techniques become automatic responses to uterine contractions. Instead of becoming tense and frightened you will relax and use special breathing patterns.

There are many different ways to relax. Concentrate on those that appeal to you and work best for you. Be sure and share your favorites with your labor partner. Being able to respond to a contraction with relaxation is difficult and takes practice. To be able to relax in labor, you will need to become aware of tension in your body and practice ways of releasing tension. Practice in different positions that are comfortable to you. Use pillows to support parts of your body. Establish a time to practice relaxation techniques and visualization. These techniques will bring about a renewed state of energy for your baby's birth. Select a time when you will not be disturbed. Turn off the phone and practice at the same time every day. The ability to relax is one of the most important coping techniques because your body's natural tendency will be to tense during contractions. Relaxation is a skill that is great to have after the pregnancy is over, it can be used throughout your life.



# BREATHING TECHNIQUES



Breathing techniques enhance relaxation, and relaxation is the most important coping tool. By using breathing techniques during labor you will be better able to decrease physical discomfort and emotionally stay on top of each contraction. By concentrating on a specific breathing pattern you redirect your thought processes in your brain. You learn to focus attention on a positive response, breathing and relaxation, and away from the sensations of the contraction.

Breathing techniques also assure your body proper oxygenation during labor and provides your baby better oxygenation. In the unprepared individual, respiratory rates change in response to pain. Breathing may quicken and become shallow, rapid and heavy, or breath holding may occur. In labor, these responses interfere with proper oxygenation of the uterine muscle. Oxygen is the fuel for your working muscles. If the uterus continues to work with an inadequate amount of oxygen, lactic acid builds up, which in turn increases pain in uterine muscle. Paced breathing will also prevent hyperventilation in labor.

## BREATHING BASICS

1. RELAX ENTIRE BODY
  - a. Relaxation is the most important labor tool
  - b. Comfortable position necessary, ideally no two body parts touching
  - c. Practice breathing techniques after relaxation
2. RELAXATION BREATH
  - a. Signal to labor partner contraction is beginning
  - b. Signal to laboring woman to completely relax
  - c. Increases oxygen supply
  - d. Sets boundaries of contraction, begin and end each contraction with a relaxation breath
  - e. Release tension as you exhale
  - f. Deep breathe, ideally in through the nose and out through the mouth
  - g. The relaxation breath should be effortless and as deep as is comfortable
3. CONCENTRATION
  - a. Concentrate on relaxing
  - b. Concentrate on the evenness of your breathing to prevent hyperventilation
  - c. Concentrate on rhythm of breathing
  - d. Concentrate on a focal point. It may be *visual*, choose something bright and close by (approximately 3 feet away). You can use an *internal* focal point, such as a vivid picture in your mind of a relaxing, safe place. You may want to use an *auditory* focal point, playing your favorite music or music that helps you relax. A *tactile* focal point such as stroking, massage, or warm packs may also be used.

## BREATHING TECHNIQUES



Baby

### 4. LABOR PARTNERS

- a. Labor partners should give actual instructions for practice, "Contraction begins.....Contraction over." The pregnant woman learns to respond to this verbal cue with relaxation and breathing patterns, then in labor, the woman responds in the same way to the contraction.
- b. Labor partners should give commands to release tension in specific areas the labor partner notes to be tense, for example, "Release the tension in your hands.....Release the tension in your shoulders."
- c. Talk the laboring woman through her contractions. Your voice will be reassuring. Saying things like "Your contraction has peaked".....or..... "Your contraction is on the downhill side," helps break the contraction into manageable segments.

No one specific breathing pattern has to be used at a specific time during labor. Use the ones that work best for you. Practice all breathing techniques. If you become skilled with each breathing technique, then you will be able to choose the one that works best for you in labor.

### PRACTICE AIDS

1. Practice breathing through contractions lasting 60 to 90 seconds.
2. Vary your position when practicing, try lying on side, standing, sitting, rocking chair etc.
3. Try effleurage with slow paced breathing and modified paced breathing.
4. If you are dizzy, you are breathing too fast, cup your hands and breathe into them.
5. Practice with Braxton Hicks contractions.
6. It is best if you take time out to practice relaxation and breathing with your labor partner daily. Other good times to practice the breathing techniques are during commercials on TV and when you go to the bathroom.



Women today have more options than ever before. The decision whether or not to have pain medication in labor, with the exception of certain emergency situations, will be yours. The choice is not always an easy one. Along with your caregiver you must weigh the benefits and possible risks. Since non-drug methods have no side effects, consider them first for coping with pain. Also, to avoid interfering with the progress of labor, often pain medication is not a choice until labor is well under way. Practicing non-drug techniques of pain control will help boost your confidence in yourself. When you are in labor is not the best time to learn about what type of pain medication is available. Familiarize yourself ahead of time with the types of pain medications, benefits and drawbacks. While it is good to be knowledgeable and have a plan prior to labor, it is also good to keep an open mind. Labor may surprise you with its intensity. Some women who had hoped to avoid pain medication change their mind once they are in labor. On the other hand, labor may not be as difficult as you anticipate and you may be surprised by your strength and ability to cope with a challenging situation.

Pain medication used in labor and birth frequently falls into two categories either systemic drugs or regional anesthetics.

**Systemic drugs** are frequently narcotics given in the IV, they affect the whole body. With IV narcotics the laboring woman stays awake. She still feels the contractions but most commonly says the drugs helped "take the edge off the contraction" and helped her relax.

**Nitrous Oxide** inhaled in labor can be useful for relieving anxiety and pain. A blend of oxygen and nitrous oxide is breathed in by the mother through a mask. Nitrous is self-administered, so not only can a woman decide how much to use, but she can also decide if she wants to stop using it and try another method of pain relief. Nitrous oxide can be easily discontinued and its effects disappear within five minutes. It is safe for mothers and babies and does not interfere with labor or breastfeeding.

**Regional anesthetics** numb the sensations in part of the body. The following are types of regional anesthetics used in labor and birth.

A local is an injection into the perineum either just before the baby's birth or just after to numb the area for an episiotomy or stitches.

A pudendal block is done just prior to the baby's birth or just after and numbs the vagina and perineum.

An epidural block numbs the lower half of the woman's body. They are given usually after a woman is dilated to 3 or 4 centimeters. An epidural requires the insertion of a tiny, flexible catheter into the back, just outside the spinal membrane. May be used for vaginal or cesarean births.

A spinal block is given as one shot into the fluid surrounding the spinal cord. They are used only for cesarean births.

**General anesthetic** puts the patient to sleep. Today it is used only for some cesarean births.

The following are possible advantages and disadvantages of pain medication:

## ADVANTAGES

- Can reduce pain and discomfort
- May help the mother to relax
- May help reduce anxiety
- Can, on occasion, speed up a slow labor if her tension is inhibiting progress
- Medication can help turn a difficult painful labor into a more positive experience

## DISADVANTAGES

- Can directly or indirectly affect the baby
- Mother may experience side effects such as a drop in blood pressure, nausea, dizziness or allergic reaction
- Can slow labor down, requiring pitocin to speed it up
- May diminish urge to push and lead to a need for forceps or vacuum extractor
- May lead to a maternal temperature and require further interventions to monitor mother and baby
- May cause drowsiness in baby and interfere with normal newborn reflexes