

Labor Support Cards

Simple tips for the special time before a birth



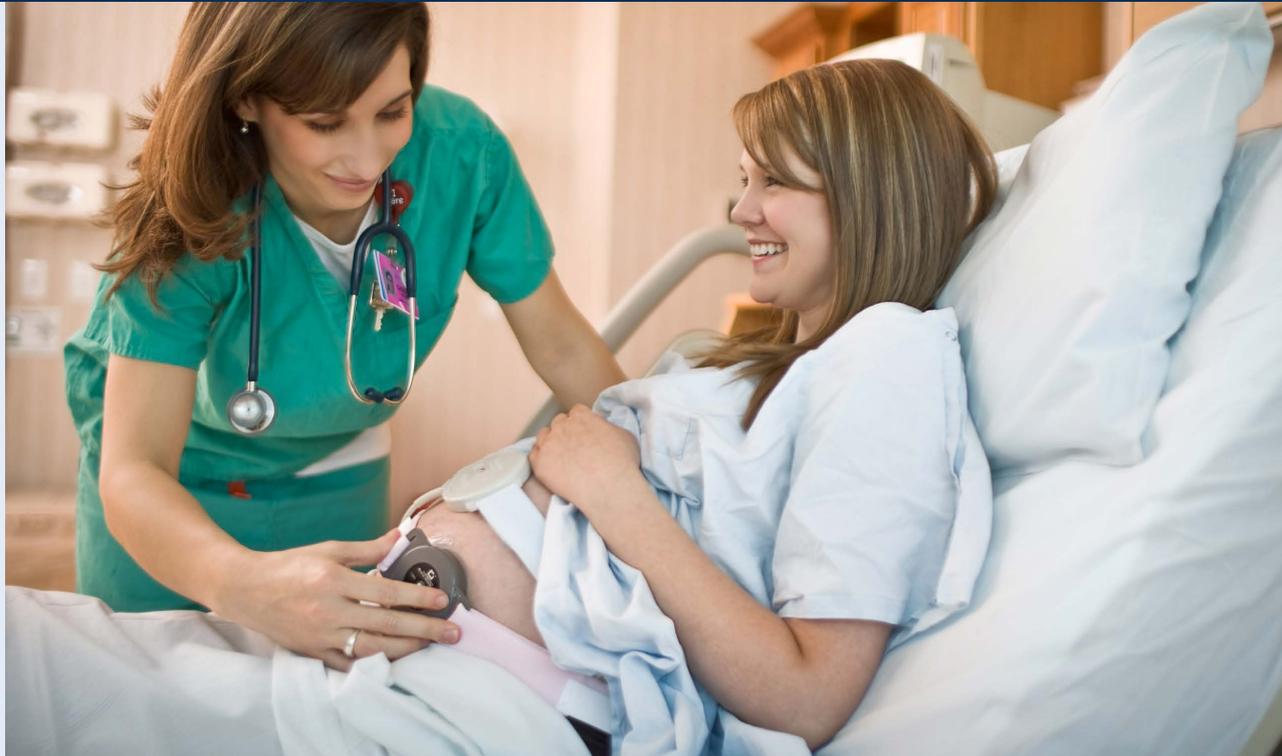
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The fear - pain cycle

What you think and do can affect how you feel.

The birth experience will be better and easier if you think and do things that **ease your fear** and **relieve tension**.

Why:

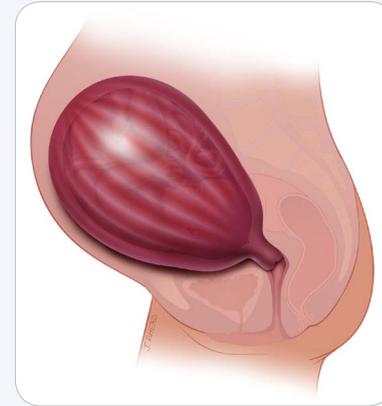
Your uterus is made of layers of strong muscle.

- **One layer of muscles runs lengthwise along the uterus. *DURING* labor**, these vertical muscles contract to pull the cervix back and push the baby down.
- **Another layer runs around the side of the uterus. *AFTER* labor**, these horizontal muscles contract to pull the cervix and uterus back in place.

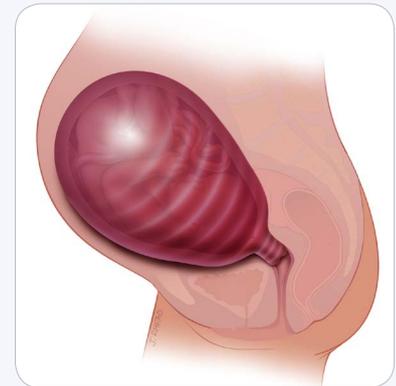
When you feel afraid during labor, your body releases hormones that stimulate the horizontal muscles. This forces the two layers of muscle to work against each other. The result is more pain — and then more fear because of the pain. Overall, your labor may be longer and more painful.

How:

Interrupt the fear-pain cycle by using the techniques described in these Labor Support Cards.



Vertical and horizontal uterine muscles





The effects of stress

It helps to recognize your own early signs of fear and stress. The earlier you **notice these signs**, the easier it will be to manage them and avoid being overwhelmed.

Why:

Fear and stress show up in your emotions and body.

- You may feel restless and irritable. Your thoughts may be disorganized or negative. You may feel angry.
- Your muscles may feel tight and stiff. Your breathing may feel shallow and fast. Your whole body may feel on edge, oversensitive.

How:

During labor, regularly “check in” with yourself. Take time to notice your thoughts, feelings, and reactions. Think about your breathing. Do a head-to-toe inventory of your muscles and posture. Ask yourself, “Where is my stress?”

What you notice can help you focus your efforts to manage the intensity of labor. Self-awareness is an important part of these Labor Support Card activities.



Fear and stress show up in your body.

Pain versus suffering

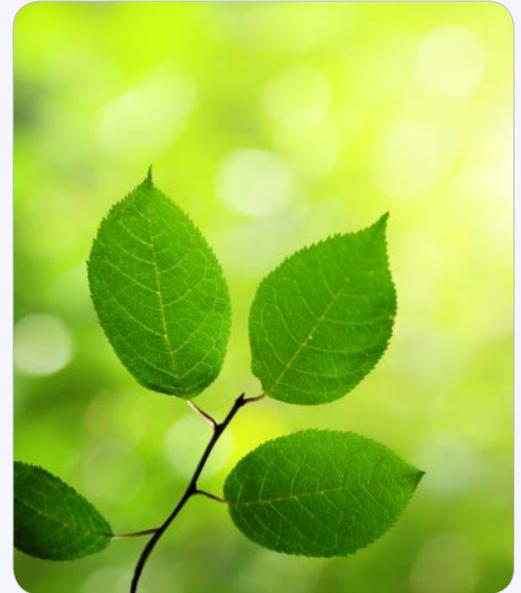
Another way to think about interrupting the cycle of fear and pain is to consider **the difference between pain and suffering**. Pain is discomfort that comes from intense sensations. Suffering is an emotional reaction — it's the distress and helplessness you may feel when you're in pain.

Why:

Research shows that suffering, not pain, is the cause of difficulty in labor. People are afraid of suffering — afraid of feeling out of control and alone. This fear can feed into more pain.

How:

You can cope with pain and avoid suffering during labor. The activities in these Labor Support Cards can help you to do that.



Gate theory: matching the pain

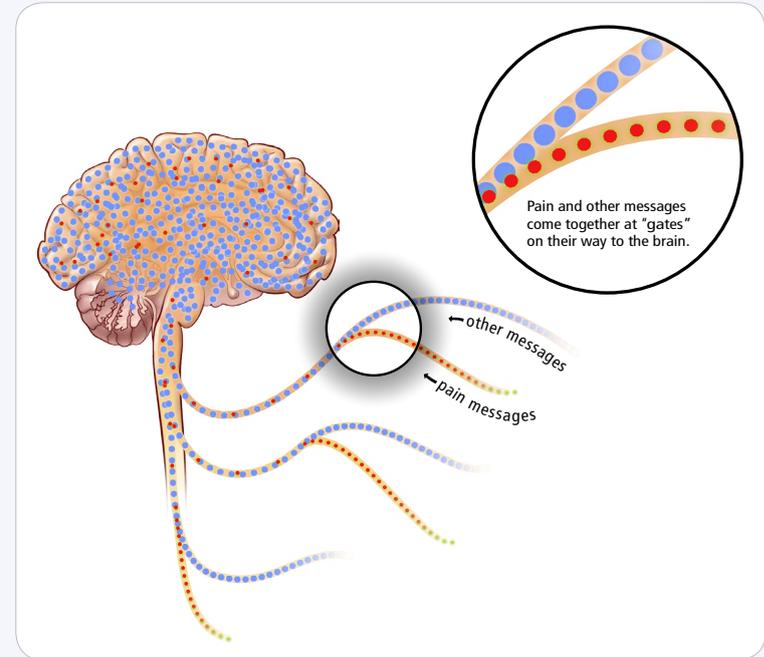
Pain messages pass through nerve “gates” to reach the brain. You can **close these gates and block the brain’s sense of pain**.

Why:

Your brain can only register so many messages at the same time. So if you provide extra messages — if you match the pain with something else — you can crowd the nerve gates. In this way, you can close the gates and alter your perception of pain.

How:

The activities in these Labor Support Cards help you focus on other messages. **They can flood your imagination and your senses — stimulating your sense of touch, taste, hearing, smell, and sight. This can lessen your pain and ease your labor.**





The walkabout

Walking is a gentle, upright activity that can help your labor.

Why:

Walking can be very useful during the first stage of labor. It keeps your pelvis moving to help the baby find the best way through. If your labor is slow to start or progress, walking can help establish a good pattern of contractions.

How:

- **Walk slowly with your partner, in relaxed way.** During contractions, stop and lean on a support, swaying your hips.
- **During hard labor, you may need a lot of support to walk between contractions.** You may need your partner to support your entire weight.





The labor dance

Slow dancing helps the pelvis move.

Why:

Upright positions — like walking and dancing — use gravity to increase the work of contractions. By moving the pelvis, the labor dance encourages your baby to move deeper into your pelvis. The labor dance can be very relaxing (especially with music) and lets your labor support partner reach your back for soothing pressure or massage.

How:

- **Stand up, facing your labor support partner.** Put your arms around your partner's shoulders and neck. Rest your head on your partner's chest or shoulder. Your partner's arms go around your sides, hands clasped at your back.
- **Sway together like you're slow dancing.** Try moving to music with different speeds and rhythms.
- **For deeper relaxation,** have your partner massage your back or talk softly into your ear.





The dangle

The dangle is an upright, supported squat. It lets your labor partner support you without risking a back injury.

Why:

The dangle helps to widen the outlet of the pelvis, while allowing you to move your hips freely. It also stretches your torso slightly. These adjustments can help the baby move into the best position for birth.

The dangle may be especially helpful if you have a backache, as a change in the baby's position may relieve the backache.

How:

- **Have your partner sit on a counter or bed**, feet supported on two chairs. Next, position yourself between your partner's legs with your back facing your partner.
- **Drape your arms over your partner's thighs.** Lower yourself into a squatting position, weight supported by your arms and your partner's thighs.
- **Breathe and relax into this gentle stretch.**





The lift

The lift is an upright technique you can use during contractions.

Why:

The lift can help a baby move out of a posterior position. (“Posterior” means that the back of your baby’s head is against the back of your pelvis — a position that can cause more painful “back labor.”) Lifting the baby up and out of the pelvis during a contraction may help your baby rotate into the preferred anterior position.

How:

- **Stand with your back to your labor partner.** Your partner’s arms should be around your belly, with hands meeting under your belly.
- **As a contraction starts, your partner should lift your belly up.** You can also use your own hands to help lift baby and belly during a contraction.
- **In between contractions, walk around.**





Leaning positions

Leaning positions relieve pressure on the pelvic floor (the muscles and tissues that support your uterus and bladder). You can try a leaning position while you're standing, kneeling, or sitting.

Why:

A leaning position may create more space and freedom for your baby to change positions in your pelvis. It may also give you a chance to rest during labor.

How:

In all these positions, feel free to rock your pelvis back and forth:

- **Standing.** Straddle a chair and lean on the back of the chair. Lean over the front of a couch.
- **Sitting.** Sit on the edge of the bed and lean forward over the bedside tray.
- **Kneeling.** Kneel and lean over the raised head of the bed. Kneel over a pillow with your bottom up. Kneel and lean over a birthing ball.





Sitting positions

Sitting positions let gravity work while allowing you to rest during labor.

Why:

A sitting position helps you relax and conserve energy. Try it if you're tired or having difficulty releasing tension, but don't want to lie down. Sitting on a toilet may help you relax the perineum (the area around your vagina) for pushing and put you in the right frame of mind to "let go."

How:

- **On the bed.** Raise the head of the bed. Recline with your arms and back supported by pillows. If you like, raise the foot of the bed, so you can support your lower body with your feet on the bed.
- **On the toilet.** Sitting forward on the toilet, you can lean forward and get support from your labor partner during contractions. Sitting backwards, you can lean over a pillow placed over the tank or pipes of the toilet. Your partner can rub your lower back. Sitting forward or backward, try putting your feet up on a step-stool or other footrest. This helps widen the pelvic outlet even more.





Rocking

Sitting in a rocking chair can be relaxing and soothing.

Why:

Rocking supports your weight, helps you relax, works with gravity, and gets your pelvis moving. All of this can help labor progress. If you're connected to an IV or a monitor during labor, rocking offers a nice change of pace from sitting or lying in bed.

How:

- **Try a low stool or foot rest** to support and stretch your legs as you rock.
- **Vary your rocking speed.** Hum or sing along. Explore to find a soothing rhythm to help you relax.
- **During contractions, try rocking forward** and holding that position.





Reclining

Reclining (leaning back) in bed may feel right during labor.

Why:

Reclining can help you rest, or even sleep, during labor. This position can also help you manage the intensity of a fast labor.

How:

- **Support your back, neck, and head** with pillows and the raised head of your bed.
- **You can also try leaning back into your partner sitting behind you** — that combination of support and resistance may feel good and reassuring.





Side-lying

During labor you may want to rest on your side, with your body in your usual sleeping position.

Why:

Side-lying can help if you're having trouble relaxing or managing pain. It takes pressure off your muscles and organs and lets your uterus come forward easily during contractions. Side-lying may be especially useful later in labor, if you find yourself getting exhausted.

How:

- **Lying on your side, use pillows** to support your arms, legs, and head.
- **Experiment to find a position that feels comfortable** and allows you to relax deeply.





Freedom positions

A freedom position is any position that helps widen the pelvis. Freedom positions include lunging and squatting.

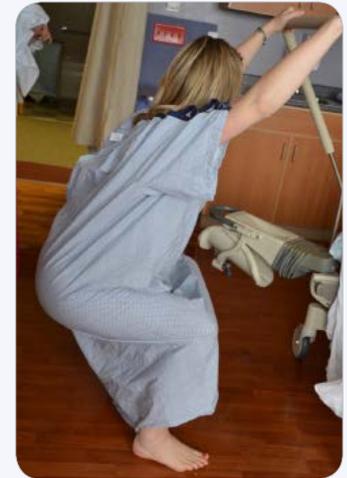
Why:

Freedom positions may help to speed labor. They change the shape of the pelvic opening and use gravity to help the baby move down the birth canal. (Note that you should only use the squatting position during the second stage of labor, after you feel the urge to push.)

Freedom positions also give you a chance to stretch tired leg muscles.

How:

- **Lunge.** Use during any stage of labor. Stand or kneel with one leg raised on a chair or stool. For balance, you can hold onto something or someone as you lunge.
- **Squat.** Use only during the second stage of labor, when you have the urge to push. Hold onto a bar or other support during a contraction. You may want to move out of a squat in between contractions.





Hands and knees

This is an “on all fours” position, but you can use it with a birthing ball or chair for more support.

Why:

This position is especially useful if you’re having back labor or want to encourage your baby to change positions inside the uterus. By relieving downward pressure, it may create room for your baby to rotate.

If your baby is already in the birth canal in a posterior position (the back of your baby’s head is pressing on your back), you may want to use a hands and knees position while you push.

This position is also good if your water has broken and you have the sensation of something hanging out of your vagina. (The umbilical cord may have come out before the baby’s head.) This position will ease pressure on the cord while the medical team investigates.

How:

- **Get on hands and knees, or kneel over a chair or birthing ball** (keeping your body weight forward over the chair or ball).
- **Experiment** with rocking or rotating your pelvis, and raising or lowering your hips and bottom.





In water

During labor, getting in a shower or tub can be a form of therapy (“hydrotherapy”).

Why:

Warm water can ease muscle tension and help you relax. Some studies show that it helps labor progress. Because the water supports your weight, immersion in a tub or pool is especially helpful for easing pressure and reducing pain.

How:

Hydrotherapy is best used later in labor, when your cervix is at least 3 centimeters dilated and your contractions are strong and regular.

- **In the shower, direct the spray of water to any area that feels especially sore** (your lower back, for example). Imagine the water rinsing away stress and tension.
- **In a tub or pool, let the water support your weight.** Move around gently or just relax — whatever feels good to you. Some women find they can be more active in the warmth and comfort of the water.





Breathing techniques

These techniques encourage deep, rhythmic breathing during labor.

Why:

- Holding your breath is a common response to labor pain. Unfortunately, it just makes you feel worse. It tires you out, tightens you up, and may make your labor slower and more difficult.
- By contrast, breathing deeply relaxes your body and helps you release the tension that can build up during labor. It can calm you and help you “go with the flow” of your labor.

How:

- **Abdominal breathing.** Put one hand on your chest, the other on your abdomen. Breathe in, noticing the hand on your abdomen rise (imagine a balloon in your belly). Let the air out and see the hand fall.
- **Rhythmic breathing.** Breathe slowly and deeply in through your nose, out through your mouth. Make breaths in and breaths out equally slow and deep.
- **Adding counts and mantras.** Have your labor partner count to help slow and deepen your breathing — three or four counts in, three or four counts out. Or, use on a positive word or phrase to create a helpful rhythm: “Re...lax, let...go, open...up.”





Vocalizing

Vocalizing just means making sounds with your voice and breath. It can include moans, groans, hums, songs, sighs, and chants.

Why:

It's natural to vocalize during labor. Many women find it helpful and empowering. Low, deep sounds are best. They help relax your body and focus your energy. (On the other hand, high-pitched sounds can make you feel out of control and frightened.)

How:

- **From the chest, relaxed.** Whatever sound you want to make — a moan, a groan, a hum — let it come from your chest, not your throat. Consciously relax your mouth, jaw, and throat. Drop your shoulders. Let the deep sound flow out — don't force it.
- **Getting started.** If you feel self-conscious, have your labor partner start first. Your partner can make a low-tone sound near your cheek and face. It could be a song, a chant of your baby's name — whatever. You may soon find yourself joining in.
- **Mixing it up.** Try vocalizing when you're doing breathing or visualization exercises.





Muscle relaxation

Muscle relaxation is both a mental exercise and a physical experience.

Why:

If you can consciously relax your voluntary muscle groups, you can help your labor progress with less tension, less fear, and less pain. You'll conserve your energy and help your mind stay clear.

How:

- **With your body in a comfortable position, relax your body to a count of three.** Let go more — relax more deeply — with each number you count. Do this repeatedly as you imagine tension melting from your body and mind.
- **If one area of your body is more tense or painful, do the exercise above with that area as your focus.** For example, instead of counting, you could say, *“Relax, lower back — relax. Relax lower back — relax.”*





Progressive muscle relaxation

This exercise can improve your focus and help relax your body.

Why:

The progressive relaxation exercise can help you stop “fighting” against the natural process of labor. Little by little, step by step, it can release tension in your mind and body.

How:

- As you take a deep breath in, tighten the muscles in your forehead as much as you can. Hold for three counts, then exhale and relax. Imagine all tension — physical and mental — draining away as you breathe out.
- Repeat the first step, moving slowly from head to toe, one area of your body at a time: eyes, mouth, jaw and cheeks, shoulders and neck, etc.
- If you like, ask your labor partner to lead you through this exercise. Your partner can add details to help you focus on getting the most from the exercise: *“Your mouth is loose, your tongue at rest in the bottom of your mouth, your jaw easy and relaxed”*...etc.





Mental relaxation

Mental relaxation is the state of calm, positive focus that helps you accept and manage the intensity of labor.

Why:

A relaxed mind leads to a relaxed body — and an easier, more positive birth experience.

How:

There's no right or wrong way to mentally relax. Experiment to find what works for you. Try these techniques:

- **Affirm.** Focus on a message that affirms your experience and your strength. *"I am safe and my baby is safe." "My baby and I, we can do this together." "As I relax, my baby comes closer."*
- **Go with the music.** Try listening to your favorite music. Sing along. Focus on the flow of notes and rhythms.
- **See the story.** Have your labor partner tell you a story about your family. Remember the good times in the past and imagine the happy future with your baby.





The rainbow technique

The rainbow technique helps you visualize — to vividly imagine and experience.

Why:

Visualizing can calm and engage your mind and senses. By lighting up your brain with pleasant and interesting images, you can dim (and diminish) any pain or fear you may feel.

How:

Have your labor partner prompt you to experience the colors of the rainbow, one by one. For example:

- **Red.** *“Picture the color red. What are its different shades? What are some favorite red things — roses, apples, cherry Slurpees? What does red smell like? What is its sound or feel? Enjoy this red...”*
- **Orange.** *“Now notice the red changing into orange. What is orange like?”*
- **The other rainbow colors.** Continue with yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet.





More visualization prompts

You can visualize any image or scenario that you find engaging and pleasant.

Why:

Visualizations focus your mental and creative energies. They pull your attention away from any distress during labor.

How:

Try some of these scenarios combined with deep breathing exercises.

- **Experience a place.** See, feel, hear, taste, and smell every aspect of a favorite place like a beach, forest, waterfall, meadow, or lake.
- **Picture your breath.** *"Breathe into the light... fill the area of discomfort with light and air." "Open up as you breathe...open and open." "Breathe in relaxation, breathe out discomfort."*
- **Re-imagine the contractions.** Feel the contractions like waves on the ocean...or your body hugging your baby. Picture the vertical muscles pulling up and back to open your cervix. See your body opening slowly like a flower.





Breath awareness

This exercise combines visualization and deep breathing.

Why:

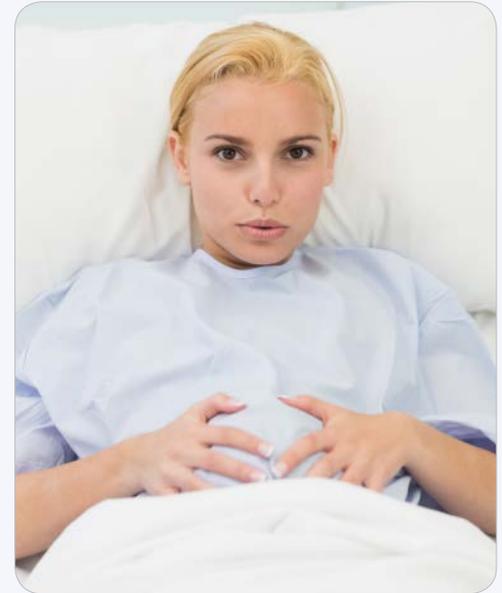
Your mind and body can work together to ease tension. This powerful combination may be very useful as your labor intensifies.

How:

As you do abdominal breathing, imagine a flower opening wider with each breath...or your pelvic bones floating apart...or waves rising and falling.

Observe in detail:

- How long does each breath in take? Each breath out?
- When does the breath start and stop?
- Is there any sound with the breath? (What sound do I want to go with that breath? Can I make that sound?)
- What happens during a contraction? Do I feel my lungs expanding as my uterus tightens? How does my breath feel in my abdomen and pelvis?





Exploring sound

This technique asks you to observe your labor experience closely, without judging or evaluating it.

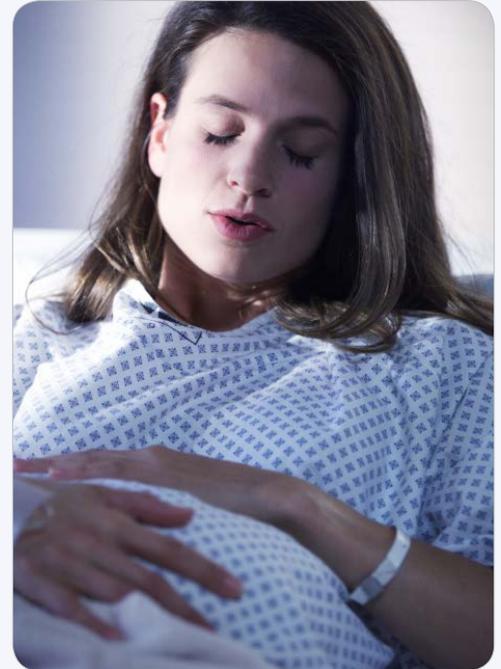
Why:

This technique may help you manage strong contractions. It can help interrupt the fear - pain cycle by directing your awareness to details of the present moment. Instead of focusing on negative thoughts or unpleasant sensations, you can go with the changing flow of labor.

How:

As you feel a contraction build, ask yourself (or have your partner ask):

- What is the smallest sound you can hear in your room now?
- What can you hear happening outside the room?
- Can you hear anything on the street outside?
- Can you hear anything inside your own body?
- As you breathe out, can you feel tension go out as well?





Edges exercise

This exercise asks you to explore the intense sensations of labor.

Why:

For many women, observing pain directly — without judgment or resistance — can have a calming effect. Instead of trying to distract yourself or mentally escape, you can center yourself in the moment. You can acknowledge and accept what's happening in your body. There's no suffering — no emotional distress attached to the physical sensation.

How:

As you feel a contraction build, ask yourself (or have your labor partner ask), "*Where are the edges of the pain?*"

- What exactly hurts? Where does the pain stop?
- Where does comfort begin? Where is your body soft and relaxed?
- At the edges, what does the pain feel like? Is it sharp, dull, ragged, watery, moving?
- Is there an "eye of the storm," a place inside the pain that feels still?
- Does the pain come on slowly, or in a rush? Does the pain melt away, lift, or slide off?





Non-focused awareness

Non-focused awareness asks you to focus on sensations in the moment, not on your ideas or fears.

Why:

According to the gate theory, your brain can only register so many messages at the same time. So if you provide extra messages, you can crowd the nerve gates and dull your sense of pain. You can do this by filling your mind with neutral observations.

How:

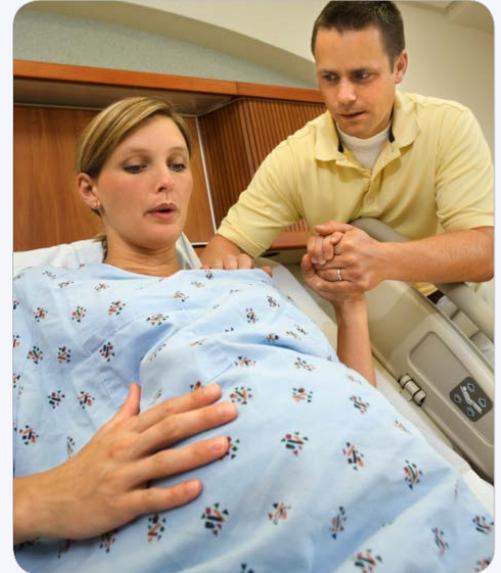
Try to recast any judgment or fear as a neutral observation or question. (Your labor partner can help redirect you as well.) For example:

Instead of:

Oh no — here comes another contraction!
I'm getting exhausted. How much longer?
Those voices and machines are annoying.
I can't concentrate!
I hate this. I can't do this much longer.

Focus on:

I notice my uterus tightening.
I hear my outward breath.
I hear the voices of my nurses and partner.
I hear beeping and music.
The contractions arrive and leave.
I feel them build and recede.
What does it feel like in between?





Wave exercise

This exercise combines visualization and deep breathing.

Why:

This exercise is useful during contractions. It can help center and relax you — pulling the focus away from discomfort, toward a gentle and positive acceptance of the sensations of labor.

How:

- As you feel a contraction come on, continue deep breathing as you picture the contraction like a swelling wave.
- As the contraction builds, think of the movement of a wave. Note the curl and spill of the water on the top of the wave, the pull and shrug of water at the bottom. Observe the wave's beauty and power as you breathe slowly in and out.
- As the contraction begins to fade, think of the wave arriving on the shore, cleansing and renewing the sand. Imagine the breeze and the moisture. Try to hear the surf and to picture tension drifting away with the receding wave. Breathe out stress.





General tips for touch and massage

Touch and massage are often used to support women in labor.

Why:

Touch and massage may help ease tension and block pain. They can also help you feel supported, loved, and comforted.

How:

You and your labor partner may have to experiment to find what feels good to you — every woman and every labor is different.

Some general tips for the labor partner:

- **Begin with gentle, smooth touch.** You can try a heavier, kneading touch if she asks for it.
- **Pay attention to areas that are often uncomfortable:** neck, shoulders, and back. Foot and leg massages are often welcome, too.
- **Experiment with positions.** For example, she can try lying on her side. This allows her to relax deeply and it gives you access to her back, neck and shoulders. Or, she can sit backwards on a chair (straddle), with a pillow to support her arms and head over the chair back.
- **If you want to try abdominal massage, keep it gentle.** Light, circular strokes feel best to many women.

Finally — remember that not every woman wants touch or massage during labor. If it isn't working, stay positive and move on.





Tools and comfort measures

Certain tools and products can make a massage even better. They can also be helpful on their own, helping to create a relaxing environment during labor.

Why:

Any pleasant sensation or engaging activity helps the brain block pain.

How:

Experiment with these:

- **Massage oil.** This can smooth out strokes along the body and create a comforting warmth on the skin.
- **Scents.** Try essential oils, scented lotions or massage oils, spices, or perfumes — any soothing aroma. Depending on the scent, it may also ease nausea, lift spirits, and help block the perception of pain.
- **Rolling pin or knobby ball.** These can help you focus or intensify the massage in a particular area.
- **Hot or cold packs.** These may be soothing during labor.
- **Stress ball or tennis ball.** Use these to apply pressure to a small area during massage. Or, the laboring woman can squeeze these rhythmically to help release stress.





Long strokes

This massage technique involves long, smooth motions with the whole hand on the person's body.

Why:

This technique can create waves of comforting sensation. It can help ease tension and focus awareness on the parts of the body receiving this pleasant "input."

How:

Start this technique in between contractions (not during a contraction). Continue through several contractions.

- Put your relaxed hands on the woman's body — whole palm in contact with the skin, fingers together.
- Beginning at one end of a long bone (for example, the shin or thigh, the bones of the arms, neck, and spine) stroke to the end of the bone.
- As you stroke, let your relaxed fingers follow the contours of her body. Maintain a slow, easy rhythm with your strokes.





The zones pattern

This massage technique works the entire back side of the body.

Why:

Firm, smooth strokes across the back of the body help flood the senses and relieve tension.

How:

Begin with the woman in a comfortable side-lying position. You'll be massaging different "zones" of her body, in turn.

- **Start with her back.** Apply oil along the length of the back, distributing it with the pads of your fingers. Standing at the head of the bed, pull your hands on either side of her spine, from her lower back upwards. Flare your hands out at the shoulders, then rotate your hands so that your fingers are on the underside of her shoulders. Pull your hands up to her neck and continue to the top of her head. Repeat five times.
- **Do a version of this stroke in the other zones of the body:** the left and right leg and buttocks, the left and right arm and shoulder.





Counter pressure

Counter pressure techniques apply steady firm pressure to a particular part of the body.

Why:

Counter pressure is helpful during contractions. It can help offset their intensity and slightly alter the shape of the pelvis. It also helps to stretch and ease ligaments, muscles, and joints.

How:

Try these counter pressure techniques:

- **Sacral pressure.** During a contraction, apply steady, gradual pressure to the sacrum (the bony area below the small of the back, above the buttocks). Try a slow circular motion from time to time.
- **Double hip-squeeze.** With your hands on either side of the woman's hips, press inward toward the pelvis during a contraction. Hold until the contraction eases, then slowly release.
- **Knee press.** With the woman sitting in bed with her legs bent up at the knee, push on her knees (aim to push her thighs back into her hips) during contractions.





Simple holding

Simple holding means laying both hands on the laboring woman's body, focusing your attention exclusively on her.

Why:

This touch can demonstrate care and respect for the woman in labor. It can convey warmth, security, and nurturing.

How:

- Lay your hands on the laboring woman's back, abdomen, upper chest, or head. Don't lean on your hands or apply pressure.
- Take a moment to focus on this experience and on her. Breathe slowly and deeply.
- Encourage her to breathe deeply, matching your own breathing.





Foot massage: pressure touches

This technique focuses pressure on the bottom of the foot.

Why:

The feet are highly sensitive. A foot massage can help the whole body relax.

How:

Once the woman in labor is in a comfortable, relaxed position, try these techniques (if you have oil or lotion, put that on your hands first):

- **Thumb walk.** Clasp your hands around the woman's foot, thumbs on the sole of the foot, fingers on top. Starting at the heel, press one thumb in, then the other. Slowly "walk" your thumbs up her foot toward her toes. Does this several times, then switch feet.
- **Pound the sole.** If she is enjoying firm pressure, try pounding or hacking the bottom of her foot with your fist. Move from the heel to the toe. Do this several times, then switch feet.

Finish by pulling on the toes, one-by-one, as if to lengthen them.





Foot massage: stroking touches

This technique massages the feet and lower legs.

Why:

The feet are highly sensitive. Massage here can ease tension all over the body.

How:

Once the woman in labor is in a comfortable, relaxed position, try these techniques (if you have oil or lotion, put that on your hands first):

- Hold the heel of her foot in one hand. Use the other hand to stroke down the back of the leg to heel (the Achilles tendon). Do this several times.
- Stroke the bottom of the foot, from the heel to the arch and then to the ball of the foot. Do this several times.
- Pull gently on the toes, one-by-one, as if to lengthen them.
- Starting again near the knee, draw your fingers down the front of the leg (the shin) while steadying the foot with your other hand.
- Finally, sandwich the whole foot in your hand. Rub gently sideways and lengthwise to stroke the top and sides of the foot.







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