

Coping with Labor Pain



How bad does labor hurt?

You've probably heard a lot of stories about giving birth. Labor and birth are different for each woman. The kind and amount of pain you have changes throughout your labor. Even if you have had a baby before, the pain from labor can be different with each baby.

Why does labor hurt?

During labor, your uterus (womb) pushes your baby down and stretches your cervix (the opening of your uterus). Each time the uterus muscles contract, you may feel pain that is like a strong cramp in your abdomen or lower back like you get during your period, but it is usually more painful than the cramps you get with your period. As your cervix and vagina stretch and open, you may feel a stretching, burning pain. Most contractions last 30 to 60 seconds, and you will be able to rest in between each one.

What can help me be successful in coping with labor pain?

This handout has lots of tips for coping with the pain of labor. Being less tense and afraid will help your labor be less painful. Three things can help you cope with labor pain successfully:

- Knowledge about what to expect
- Belief in yourself
- Emotional support and coaching during your labor

How can I decide before labor starts what pain management methods are right for me?

When you are deciding where to give birth and what pain management methods to use, think first about what your goals are for your labor and how strong your desire is to give birth without using pain medication. Remember that nobody knows ahead of time how painful or difficult their labor will be. Knowing your goal and how much you want to work toward your goal is the best place to start. This way, when you are in labor, you can be flexible and trust your support persons and caregivers to help you make decisions that are right for you at that time. You are most likely to successfully give birth without pain medication if this is your number one goal.

What can I do to prepare for labor?

- Stay physically active during your pregnancy. You will have more strength to get through labor, and women who are in good physical shape often have shorter labors.
- Take childbirth classes. The more you know, the less you fear. Fear makes pain hurt more.
- Arrange for a support person or doula. Having a person whose only job is to support you during labor will help you cope better during labor and feel more satisfied with the experience.

What can I do to cope with early labor?

- Go for a walk, do some exercise, or dance. The more you move and are distracted, the less you hurt!
- Do something you enjoy. Having a distraction will help you keep your mind off the pain.
- Drink lots of fluids so you don't get dehydrated and eat lightly if you are hungry.
- Take a warm shower or bath. Water often makes your contractions easier to handle and can help your contractions work better.

What can I do to cope during active labor?

Find your rhythm. Women who cope well during labor go back and forth between resting between the contractions and regular movements that help cope with pain during the contractions. Each person has their own rhythm that works. Here are some ideas to try:

Between Contractions

- Rest by being still or by rocking gently.
- Focus on your natural breathing. Awareness of breath relaxes you.



- Relax your muscles.
- Move or rock your hips.
- Change positions often.
- Listen to music that soothes you. This may help you relax and keep your mind off the pain.
- Believe you can do it. You can!
- Remember why you are doing this. Your baby will be here soon!

During Contractions

- Use massage or counterpressure. Many women find having their back massaged the same way during each contraction helps them keep a rhythm. Sometimes constant pressure on your low back during each contraction is soothing.
- Get in a tub or shower. Water therapy can help ease your pain and make the contractions work better.
- Make noise. You might moan, hum, or repeat comforting words over and over as you go through each contraction.

What can my support person do during labor to help me cope with labor pain?

- Help you find your rhythm and then help you keep making the same noise and movements during a contraction and doing the same relaxation techniques between contractions.
- Give you a back rub or hold your hand quietly.
- Offer you ice chips, water, or juice between contractions.
- Help you change positions and support your body.
- Keep the lights low and play soft music.
- Put a cold washcloth on your forehead or neck.
- Put a heating pad or warm washcloth on your lower back.
- Talk you through each contraction, supporting your movements and your noises.
- Cheer you on!

What can my health care provider do during labor to help me cope with labor pain?

- Answer your questions.
- Check your progress and give you direction.
- Assure you that things are going normally.
- Provide pain medication if needed. Remember you are not a failure if you decide that you need pain medication to help you through labor. Labor is hard work!

For More Information

Childbirth Connection

This brochure provides a variety of comfort measures to manage labor pain.
<http://www.childbirthconnection.org/pdfs/comfort-in-labor-simkin.pdf>

Child Development Institute

Specific ways to help ease your pain during labor.
http://childdevelopmentinfo.com/child-development/preparing_for_birth/easing_labor_pain/

Doulas of North America (DONA)

Information about what a doula is, what the benefits of a doula are, and how to find a doula in your area.
<http://www.dona.org>

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