

KEEPING LABOUR FLOWING

A GUIDE FOR WOMEN & BIRTH PARTNERS

Ways to support women in labour using breathing techniques and active positions, and how to create a relaxed and calming birthing environment



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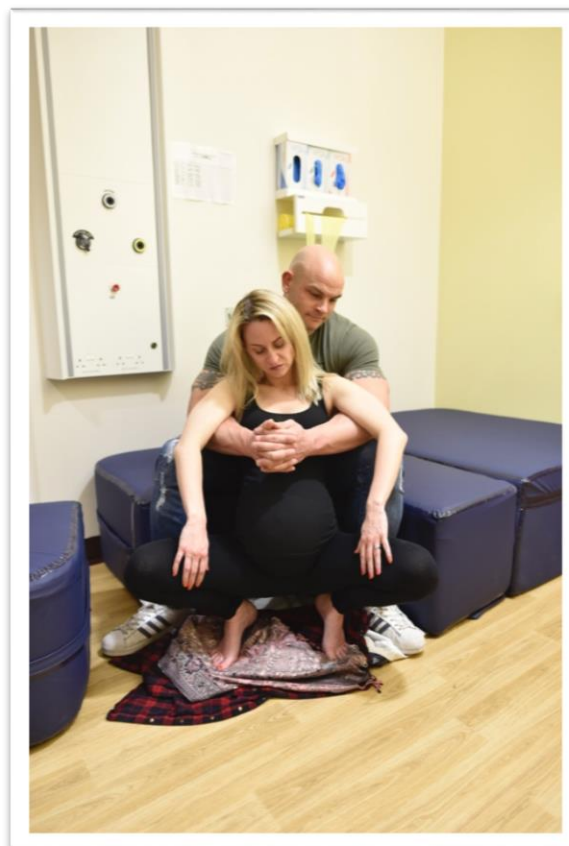
Welcome

Our baby's birth is exciting, but many people also feel anxious about what will happen. Labour can be an intense, unknown process, especially with our first babies, and we can worry about what to do, how to manage the contractions and how birth partners can help. All these feelings are normal, and this booklet has been put together to provide information, support and reassurance, helping women and birth partners to understand labour and things they can do to work with the process.

As a Birth Partner you are a tremendous source of practical and emotional support to the labouring woman, but it is easy to panic and feel like a spare part, not really knowing what you can do to help. We hope this booklet will go some way to easing your anxiety and explaining some of the many ways you can offer practical and emotional support to the woman during labour.

This booklet sets out to:

- ♥ Help women and their birth partners understand the process of labour in more detail
- ♥ Understand women's needs in labour and how birth partners can help labour to flow
- ♥ Understand how women moving and using different positions helps keep labour to progress and encourage baby into a favourable position
- ♥ Learn simple breathing techniques to help women keep calm, feel relaxed and cope with contractions
- ♥ Understand how to support the woman practically and emotionally throughout her labour



Understanding a Woman's Needs in Labour

Labour is the process women go through as they prepare to birth their babies. The uterus contracts regularly to open the cervix and allow the baby to pass through the birth canal/vagina and be born. These sensations are experienced differently by each woman and can feel very powerful and intense.

Labour contractions are controlled by a woman's hormones and these hormones can be sensitive and responsive to the environment we are in. When we appreciate these needs a little more we can better understand how to support labour to progress. Just as a cat would go and find a quiet, cosy, dark hidden space to have her kittens, humans have similar needs and it really helps labour progress when women feel safe and calm.

A woman's basic needs in labour are:

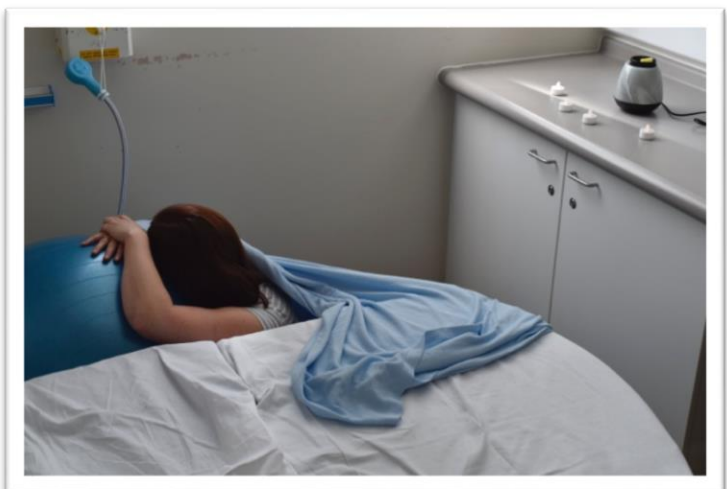
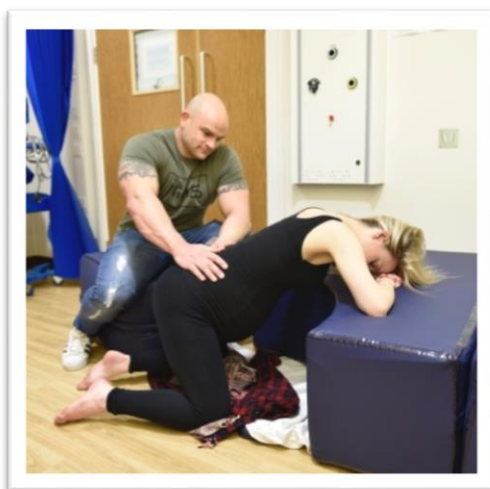
- ♥ To feel safe
- ♥ Not to have to think and talk if she doesn't want to
- ♥ Not to feel watched or observed
- ♥ The room to be dark or dimly lit with lamps or candles not bright lights
- ♥ For her surroundings to be warm, calm and quiet
- ♥ To feel relaxed and not stressed and for those around her to be calm
- ♥ To be able to move around, change position and make sound as she needs to



Creating A Supportive Environment

As a birth partner there is a lot you can do to help meet these needs and create an environment that helps the labour progress:

- ♥ Make the labour room feel cosy and welcoming, this makes a big difference and helps women feel more comfortable. The midwives will be happy to move the bed and chairs if you ask, and to show you how the bed controls work. Bring your own blankets, pillows and music, even images or pictures if they help her to focus and put them up around the room.
- ♥ Turn down the lights or ask the midwives to help as the switches can be complicated! Ask for the lamps and electric tea lights to make the room feel warm, cosy and dimly lit. Use scents that help her feel relaxed.
- ♥ Help the laboring woman to feel she is safe and loved, this really helps her hormone levels stay high. Talk to her gently, encourage her and tell her she is doing really well.
- ♥ Gentle touch can help birth hormones to keep flowing, so hold her hand, stroke her gently and offer to massage or press her lower back during contractions. She'll let you know how and if this is helping.



- ♥ Keep general conversation and chitchat to a minimum, avoiding asking her lots of questions, as it helps if women can drift into their own world and relax. It's useful to talk before labour about her preferences and choices and note these down in a birth plan so you know what her wishes are about pain relief and how she would like her labour to progress.
- ♥ Help her to feel warm and comfortable. Offer to cover her in a blanket, even if she's kneeling on the bed or floor, help her to feel calm, warm and unobserved. Let her know you are there for her, ask her what she needs.
- ♥ Ask the midwives to bring a birth ball, some floor mats or the soft birthing couch so she can explore different moving and kneeling positions which help keep labour moving along.
- ♥ Remember that it's really beneficial for her to rest and sleep a little between contractions if she can, so encourage her to do this. If she rests, try to rest yourself too so you will have energy when she needs you further along. Encourage her to breathe softly, soften her muscles and let go.
- ♥ Remember that feeling warm can help hormone levels stay high and water can ease the pain, so try offering to put on the shower or ask for the birthing pool to be filled up.
- ♥ Try to keep yourself calm too, and remember that your presence brings comfort and support, you don't have to be doing lots and talking, but being there, holding her hand, encouraging her, pressing her back during contractions and being present gives emotional support and reassurance. If you feel yourself becoming anxious or stressed, take a quick break or a walk. Don't forget to eat and drink if you need to.



- ♥ Encourage her to listen to her body, ask her what she feels she wants and needs to do. Ask her if she'd like to move, and help her to change position. If she says she needs to push remind her how well she is doing, and to listen to her body and follow its lead.

Moving Around In Labour Really Helps

When we think of labour and birth we tend to think of women lying on their backs on a hospital bed, but in fact, being upright and moving is really beneficial for both mother and baby. Lying down on her back may be necessary or comfortable at some points during labour, but to do so for many hours can cause labour to slow down and become more painful. As part of their journey to being born, babies need to move and turn, and women staying on their backs for many hours can make this more difficult.

The Active Birth Posters and photos show some of the many different upright positions that women can use in labour. Try to let go of the idea of lying down, and imagine labour as a time of kneeling, rocking, swaying, moving, walking, leaning and circling her hips.



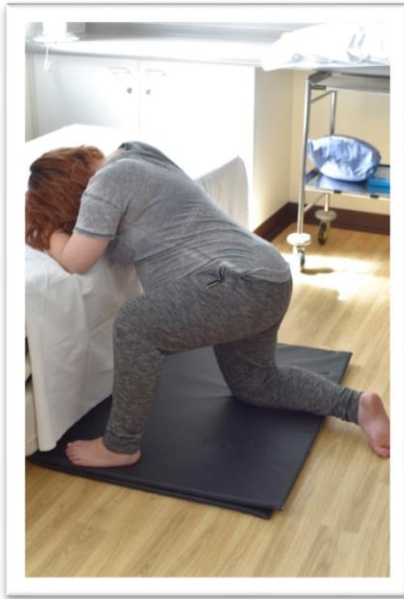
Moving and using upright active postures have many benefits including:

- ♥ Helping women to feel calm and empowered
- ♥ Helping women to cope with the intensity of the contractions
- ♥ Helping encourage baby into a favourable position for birth
- ♥ Helping baby to move from the 'back to back' position which can cause labour to slow and pain and pressure to be felt in her back
- ♥ Helping to keep labour progressing
- ♥ Shortening time of labour
- ♥ Working with, rather than against, gravity for contractions and baby's birth

"Having my knees on the floor and leaning over the birth ball helped the most with my contractions. I could move during my contractions and rest easily when I wasn't having them this way and it was easy for my husband to rub my back too."

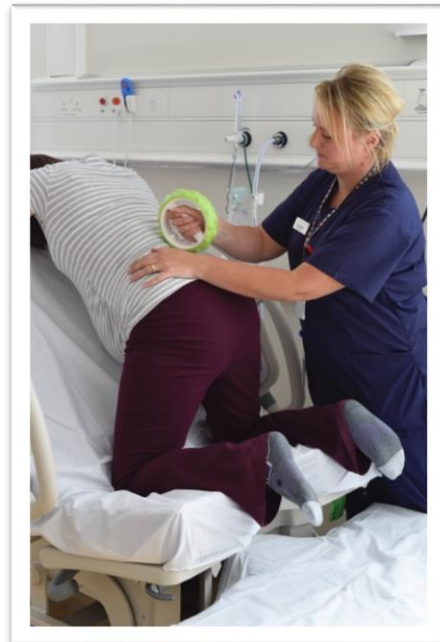
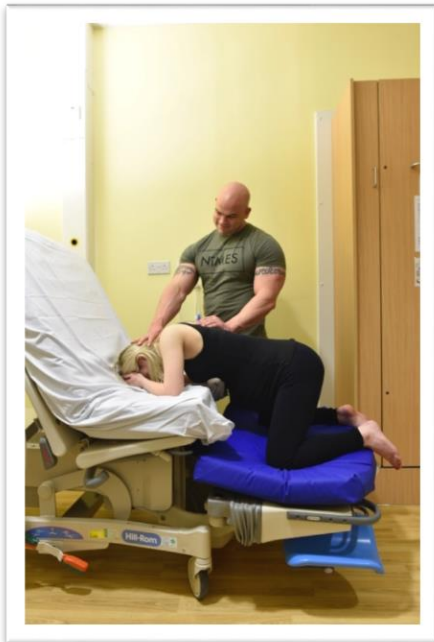
- Sarah

Try not to see the bed as a bed to lie on like a patient, but a useful piece of furniture for kneeling, leaning and resting on.



Feel free to ask the midwives for assistance to move the bed to give more room to move about, and to help you with the settings and controls.

The back of the bed tilts upwards, so tilting it to 90 degrees or so makes a comfortable position for her to kneel up on and lean onto the back of the bed.

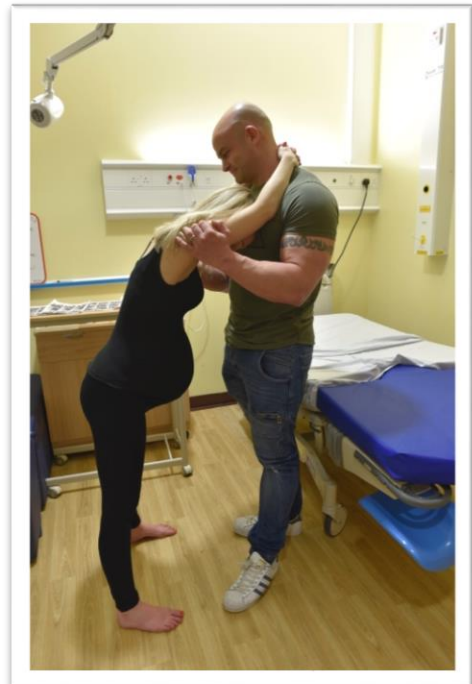
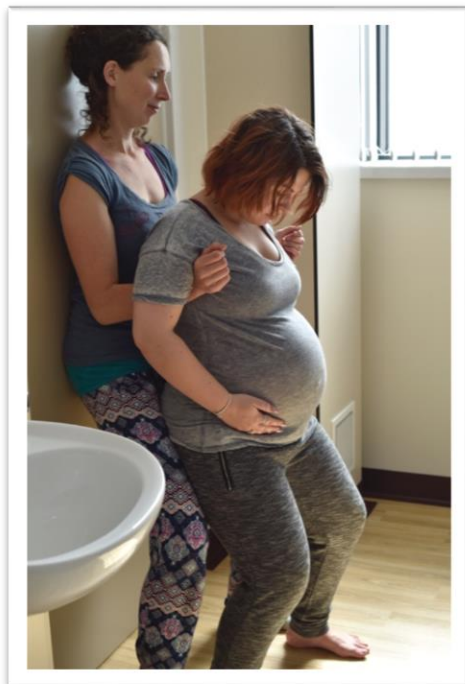


These positions help labour to progress and encourage baby into more favourable positions for birth. Circling her hips or gently rocking backwards and forwards during contractions and breathing deeply can really help cope with the sensations.

Kneeling on all fours on the floor using the mats for support can be very effective in helping labour to progress and encouraging baby into more favourable positions for birth.



Sitting on the ball is also useful, as is leaning forwards onto the chair or the bed. Being physically supported by her birth partner can help women become more comfortable and the touch and intimacy can help keep the labour hormones flowing. It really helps to move and sway with the contractions and breathe through the intensity.



“I spent my labour standing up and leaning over the bed moving my hips with the contractions, this really helped and I think it helped labour to go quite quickly. I had her kneeling up on the bed. Amazing!” - Ashley

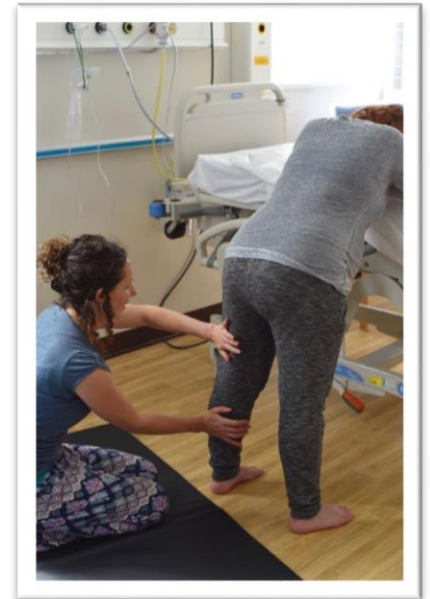
Working with Labour rather than Against It

This cycle of moving, swaying, rocking and circling the hips during the contraction and then to rest once it has passed helps to release tension and help the woman stay relaxed and feel in control by working with her body. Relaxed birthing muscles in the uterus can work more efficiently and effectively, making the contractions more manageable.

This is very different to lying down then tensing up and fighting the intensity of the contraction as it comes. In this situation women can easily get tired and disheartened and labour can feel more painful.

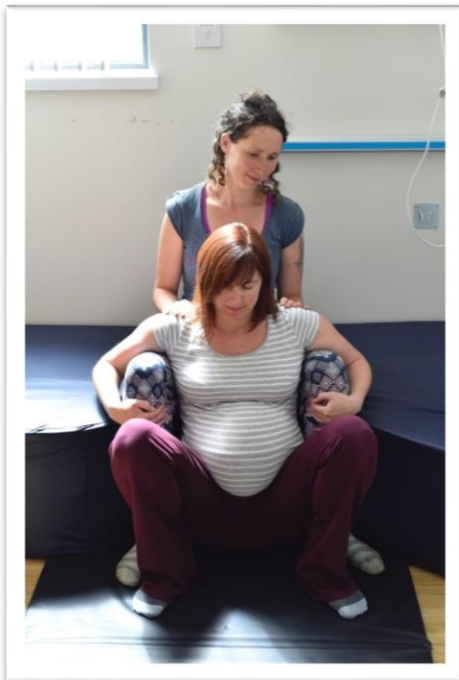
A birth partner can encourage the labouring woman to breathe deeply and to move gently with the feelings of the contractions and then to rest and release once it has passed. Think flowing not fighting!

Firm pressure with the palms of your hands on the back of her pelvis can feel supportive for some women, as can gentle touch and massage on the back and hips.

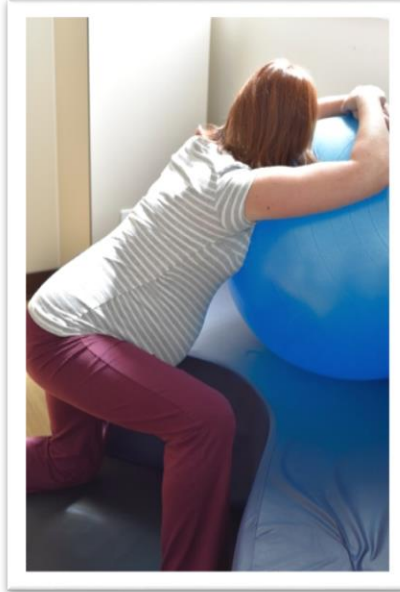
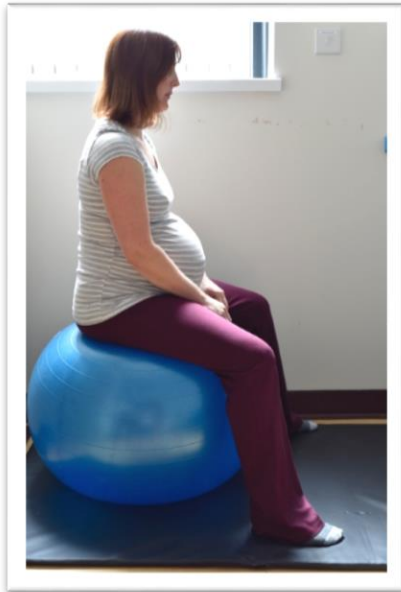


“I found kneeling and holding on to the chair helped me loads. I could use the chair to help with each contraction while my husband rubbed the bottom of my back.”
- Emma

“I found being on all fours and deep breathing very helpful, it moved things along very quickly.” - Corinna

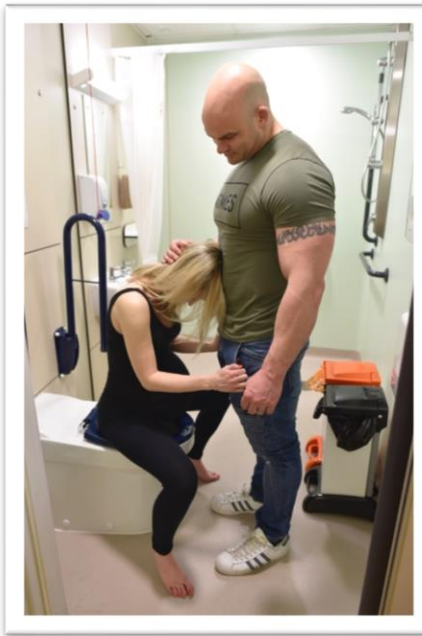
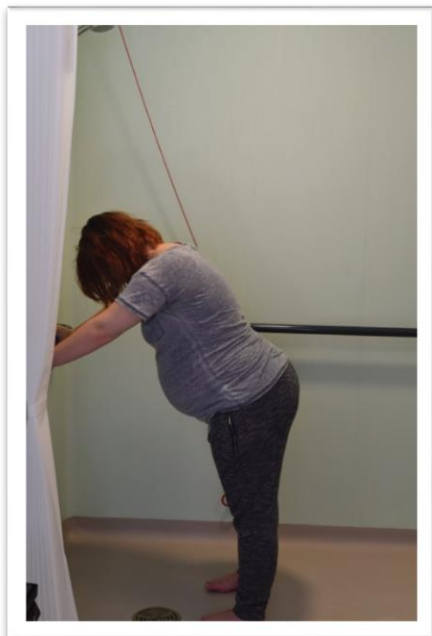


Movement and change of position can make a difference to how labour progresses, so encourage her to stay upright and move into whatever position she feels comfortable.



Warmth and water can provide comfort and ease of movement; ask if the pool is available, or suggest a warm shower. Privacy can help her to feel safe and unobserved.

Regularly going to the toilet is helpful as emptying the bladder gives space for baby to move down. The position of sitting on the toilet itself can feel comfortable and private and really help her to open and relax.



The Benefits of Breathing & Relaxation

As well as using the active, upright positions, breathing and relaxation are excellent support in labour. Women can use deep breathing and relaxation to let go of any stress, anxiety and muscle tension and keep labour flowing. As a birth partner you can use breathing and relaxation to release anxiety and tension, helping you keep calm also.

Don't worry about having to learn complicated breathing techniques. Keep reminding her to breathe deeply and to follow the rhythm of her own breathing... she doesn't need to hold her breath at all... just follow the inhale inwards and let the exhale help her relax and let go:

- ♥ Simply remind her to breathe in deeply and gently through her nose, all the way down to her baby.
- ♥ Then to breathe out a long, slow exhale, and as she breathes out, remind her to soften her face and her jaw, soften her muscles, close her eyes and relax.
- ♥ Remind her to soften her hands and her feet, her arms and her legs, her back and her hips.
- ♥ The inhale can help her to feel strong, and the exhale can help her to soften the body, relax and let go.

This is useful for birth partners too; follow your inhale all the way deep into your belly, feel the expansion of breath in the body, and then follow your exhale out slowly, softening your face, lips, throat shoulders, arms and hands. Repeat this a few times and feel the difference the softening feeling makes to your body.

Imagine you are letting go of stress, anxiety, tension and worry with the exhale, imagine these are dissolving through your feet. By letting them go you are making more space for calm and positive qualities, creating more space to think and breathe.

Breathing through Contractions

Breathing can help women cope with their contractions. As she feels a contraction building, encourage her to breathe deeply and gently through her nose. It can be useful to imagine she is breathing all the way down to her baby, breathing deeper than the intensity of the feeling, scooping it all up and then letting it go with her out breath. Breathing out through her mouth, strongly and with soft relaxed face and lips is also very effective.

Taking labour breath by breath, one contraction at a time, is one of the most useful tools for getting through labour. Rather than thinking of the many hours that have been and the many more likely to follow, instead simply focus on the deep, powerful breathing rather than the clock to cope with the intensity and reduce feelings of anxiety and fear.

Remind her that each contraction is bringing her closer to meeting her baby.

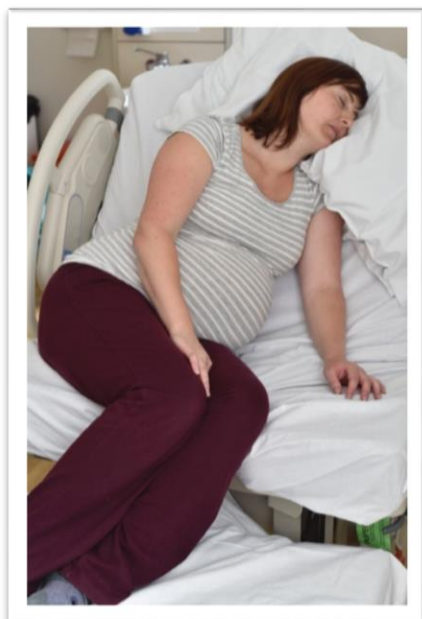
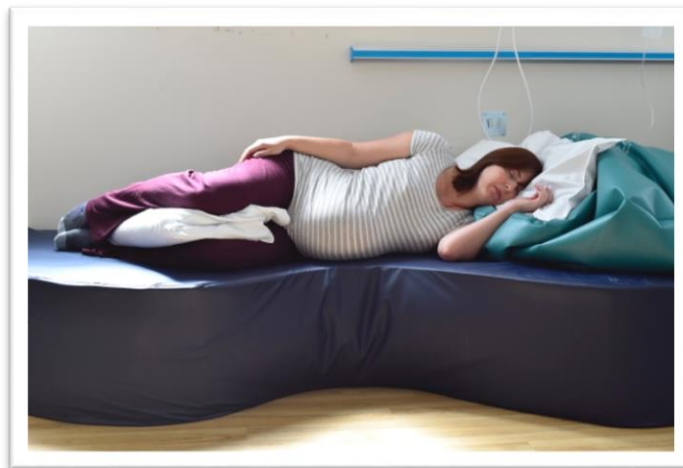
The Power of Birthing Sounds

When not feeling self-conscious, many women naturally make sounds during labour and birth. Whilst these sounds might sound unusually loud and strange, they have a purpose. Such sounds provide a natural form of pain relief, especially when they come from low down in the body, rather than screams from the throat. Think of the sounds an athlete may make as they exert themselves in their sport; the noises aren't a sign of weakness or necessarily of pain, but of power, energy and drawing strength.

Encourage her to feel comfortable to make sounds, it isn't a sign she isn't coping with labour, but a sign that she is. Remind her to breathe deeply and make sounds from low down in her belly, like the sound of a cow mooing! Encourage her to keep her jaw and mouth loose and to make sure teeth are not clenched. Blowing raspberries helps to let go of tension.

Resting Between Contractions

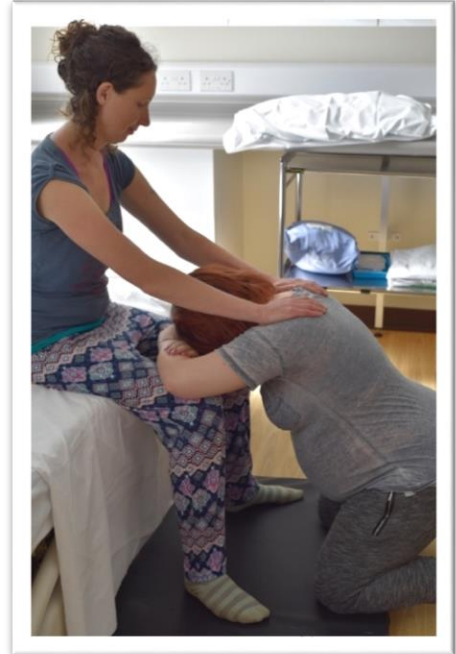
In the time between contractions, it's really helpful for her to rest and relax. Some women like to drift into their own world with their head down, eyes closed and even sleep a little as they gather energy for the next wave of intensity.



Emotional Support

As a birth partner don't underestimate the value of your presence and kind words. Labour is one of the most intense and uncertain experiences a woman can go through. Use simple, short sentences to give encouragement and support.

- ♥ Let her hold your hand. Stroke her back and shoulders and try applying firm pressure on her lower back during the intensity of contractions.
- ♥ Remind her that she can do it, that she is doing it. That each contraction is bringing baby closer.
- ♥ Encourage her to breathe slowly and deeply, to breathe deeper than the feelings.
- ♥ Remind her that labour takes time, and to keep breathing.



Affirmations

Some women really like positive birth affirmations. These are short statements to create feelings of encouragement and positivity. They give you both something positive to focus on.

Perhaps during pregnancy, take time to think about what positive statements you'd like to make and, either on your own or with your partner, come up with affirmations that feel good for you. Repeat them aloud or silently as you breathe, and whisper them to each other to help keep strong and focused. You can write them on the white board in the labour room too.

I trust my body I follow my breath. I can, I can.

I listen to my body and trust my intuition.

Birth is like the waves of the ocean. Each wave brings baby closer.

I breathe deeper and go with the flow of my labour.

Slowly, I soften and open.

Release

Relax

Open

My baby is happy and healthy, I am peaceful and strong.

The Second Stage – Baby is Coming!

Throughout labour the body is producing the hormone oxytocin, which is what causes the muscles of the uterus to contract and the cervix to open. As the labour progresses and the cervix is open enough for the baby to descend, women may be aware of the natural expulsive reflex and feel an overwhelming urge to bear down and push. As it can be an intense and emotional time as baby arrives into the world so protecting that calm environment where the mother feels safe and in tune with her body helps this reflex to kick in.

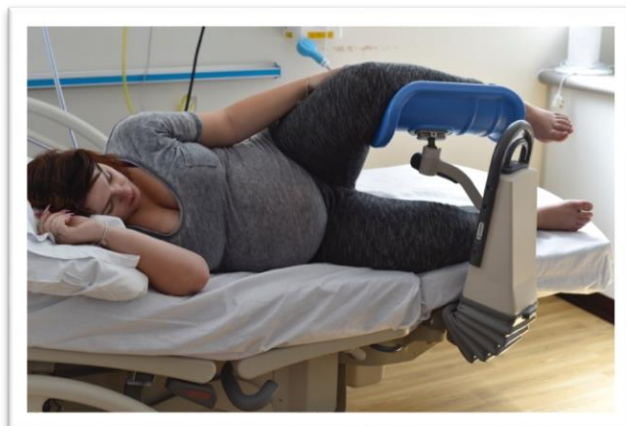
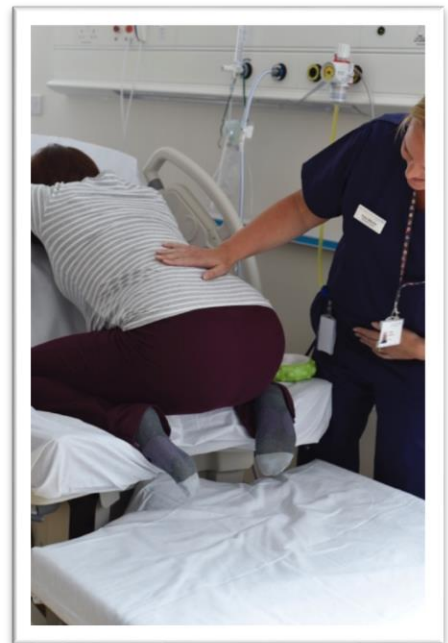
At this point she may be making more noises and grunts or she may seem withdrawn and not wish to engage or communicate. She may feel moments of panic, nausea or fear as adrenaline is released, and this is a perfect time to help re-focus and calm her through reassurance and affirmations that she is doing really well and that baby will soon be here.

It is common for women to feel an urge to move their bowels at this stage, as baby is descending and putting pressure on the rectum. It's important to encourage her to go with this feeling and not fight against it as it helps make space for baby to descend. It is perfectly normal to perhaps pass a stool at this stage and the midwives will be discreet and unfazed.

Mother-Directed Breathing

Mother-directed breathing is more beneficial than forced or coached pushing, so remind her to wait for the urge to bear down with the next contraction and push along with her body. Remember flowing rather than fighting. Mother-led pushing rather than forced pushing can also help reduce the risk of tearing or need for episiotomy and lower the risk of foetal distress.

Making use of gravity through upright positions and gentle movement can be really beneficial at this stage. Squatting, being on all fours or kneeling while leaning over the end of the bed are great positions for birth. If she feels tired and prefers to lie down, lying on her left side with her hips open and supported gives baby as much room as possible to freely descend and rotate.



- ♥ Encourage her to continue to breathe with long slow exhalations rather than holding her breath.
- ♥ Help her to relax and soften any tension, remind her to unclench her jaw, perhaps open her mouth wide and use deep low sounds.
- ♥ Give gentle reassurance and words of support without coached pushing.
- ♥ Support her in whichever position she feels comfortable for birthing

Welcoming Baby!

Once baby is here, women's hormone levels are even higher than they have been throughout pregnancy and labour. Baby's arrival is a special time, and the role of the birth partner is so important. Let this be a calm, quiet, unhurried time where mother and baby meet each other, cuddle, gaze at each other as baby slowly adjusts to being outside the womb.

Babies are usually placed skin to skin, which means baby isn't washed or dressed but cuddles straight onto the woman's warm, bare skin. The creamy white vernix babies are sometimes born with can be massaged gently into the skin. The cord is usually clamped once it is white and has stopped pulsating, allowing full transmission of cord blood and all its benefits to the baby.

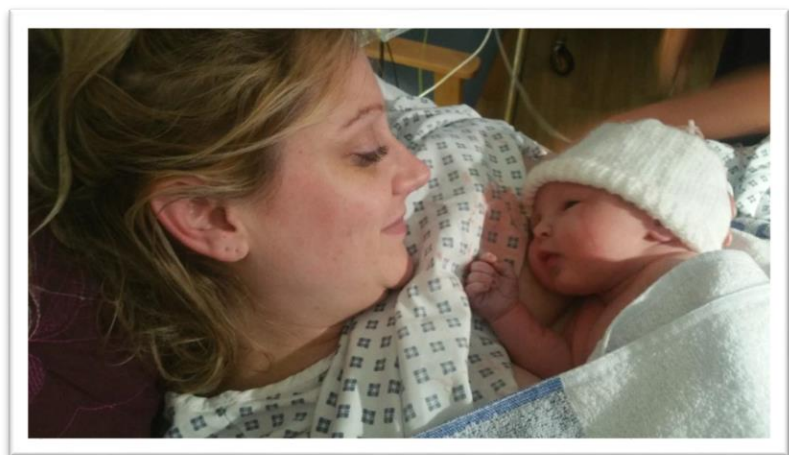
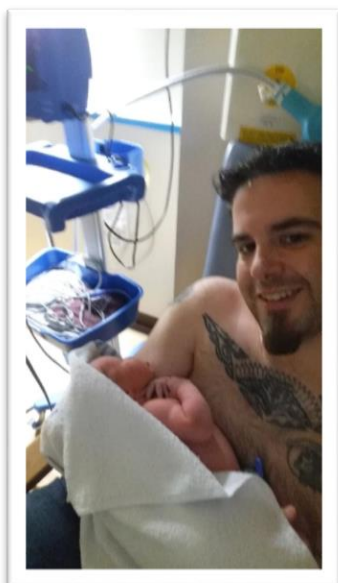
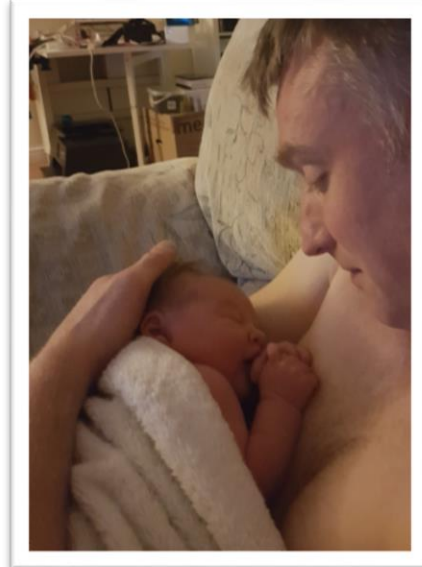
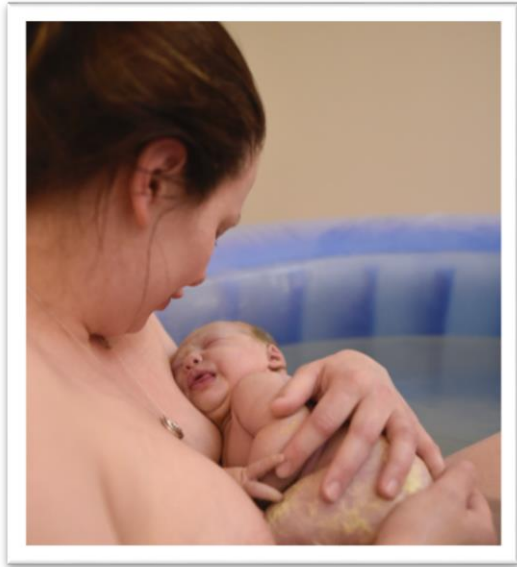
As well as being a beautiful time of wonder, skin to skin has many benefits for mother and baby including:

- ♥ Helping to regulate baby's breathing and heart rate
- ♥ Helping baby adjust and regulate her/his temperature and adjusting to conditions outside the womb
- ♥ An important part of the bonding process
- ♥ Helps initiate breastfeeding. Baby doesn't need to suckle and feed straight away, but skin to skin helps the process begin
- ♥ Keeping the lights dim and the environment quiet and calm whilst having warm cuddles releases high levels of hormones which help to expel the placenta.



Partners can also enjoy skin to skin with baby. This is a beautiful way for you to all bond and connect after the intensity of labour. And if the woman is unable to have skin to skin, partners holding baby skin to skin brings all of the same benefits to baby, helping them adjust to their new world.

The benefits of skin to skin are not limited to the moments after birth. Bonding is something which happens each and every time you interact with your baby. Both parents cuddling baby skin to skin in the days, weeks and months following birth provide comfort and reassurance to baby and are a beautiful way to soothe, settle and love baby in the early times.



Early Weeks & Post Natal Recovery

Having a baby is a huge life change and it can take time for you as new parents to get used to looking after your new baby. Pregnancy, labour and birth are intense experiences physically, mentally and emotionally and it can take time for women to begin to recover, regain their energy and find confidence feeding and caring for their babies, and for you all to find your way as a family.

Rather than rushing to get back to normal, it is okay and very nourishing to let yourself take your time as new parents to recover from the birth, get to know your baby, find your feet with feeding and becoming a family. In the early days and weeks, it can help to:

- ♥ Prioritise her needs for rest, physical recovery and time with baby
- ♥ Enjoy skin to skin with baby; this is supportive for parents and babies and is a great way to get to grips with breastfeeding
- ♥ Get plenty of rest when you can and eat nutritious food
- ♥ Taking time to get breastfeeding established and asking for help if you need to
- ♥ Asking visitors to help out practically with cooking, shopping and around the house
- ♥ Remember that having a baby is a huge life change, and as well as feeling happy, we can experience a lot of other emotions too. Keep talking to friends and family and ask for help if you are struggling.
- ♥ Remember that looking after a baby is a new experience and you learn what to do by getting to know and love your own baby in your own way and in your own time. Be patient and kind to yourselves.
- ♥ Ask for help, information and support from your midwife, health visitor, GP, local breastfeeding support group and Children's Centres if you are need to.
- ♥ The Maternity Voices Website has a list of local support and information services at <https://www.wnecumbriamvp.co.uk>

Reflecting on Birth Experiences

If there are aspects of your birth experience you are struggling to remember, come to terms with or understand, it can be useful to contact the Post Natal Listening Service.

You are able to talk through your experiences with a midwife who will look through your notes and help you understand your birth in more detail.

Ask your midwife or health visitor for more details.



About Maternity Voices Partnership (MVP)

Send Us Your Feedback #YourVoiceCounts

Our Maternity Voices Partnership group welcomes feedback, positive and negative, and fed back anonymously to improve care locally. Do get in touch and share your experiences

<https://www.wnecumbriamvp.co.uk/contact>

Get Involved in Your MVP

If you'd like to get involved in the work of your local MVP, we welcome new members and would like to hear your ideas and contributions at our baby-friendly meetings. Meeting dates are on our website. Get in touch info@wnecumbriamvp.co.uk If you want to see what we do, visit our web site. www.wnecumbriamvp.co.uk.

About the Authors

Jenny Fye and Clare Cooper are local Maternity Voices Service User Representatives and are passionate about supporting other women during pregnancy, labour and birth. Jenny Fye is a mother of four and a Hypnobirthing teacher. Clare Cooper is a mother of three and a Pregnancy, Yoga and Birth Preparation teacher.

Acknowledgements

Clare and Jenny would like to thank the women and partners who modelled for the photos for the booklet. Thank you to the midwives who took time to share their professional comments and contributions, and who will continue to share the booklet through antenatal classes, appointments and on Labour Ward.



Working in partnership to improve maternity services

To download a copy of the *Keep Labour Flowing* booklet:

<https://www.wnecumbriamvp.co.uk/personalised-care-and-your-choices>