

Tips for Coping During the First Stage of Labor

Stay Home as Long as Possible

In general, don't go to the hospital in early labor just because you are in early labor. Follow your health care provider's instructions.

- If your water hasn't broken, stay home as long as you comfortably can. It's easier to relax at home.
- If you don't have a change to your cervix or you aren't having regular contractions — even if you are dilated past 3 centimeters — your health care team may recommend you go home.

Pace Yourself

Most labors last many hours. First labors often start slowly. It usually takes a number of hours for the cervix to thin out (efface) and open (dilate) to 3 centimeters. Sometimes contractions start and stop over a period of days. Pace yourself for a long haul.

Get Some Rest

- If you are tired, or this is your normal sleep time, try to sleep.
- Take a warm shower to relax you.
- Sleep between contractions if you can. This will conserve your energy. If you are rested, alternate activity and resting.

Nourish Yourself

- Drink water, fruit juices or tea. Drink at least 6 ounces each hour.
- Eat lightly. Eat foods that are easy to digest, like Jell-O[®], toast and soup.

Distract Yourself to Stay Relaxed

Staying relaxed keeps your body supplied with oxygen and lets your uterus do the work of thinning and opening your cervix.

- Take a walk early in labor.
- Watch a movie.
- Read.
- Talk with family members and friends.
- Play a game.
- Take a warm shower or bath.
- Think about a calm and pleasant place.
- Think about your baby.

Listen to Music and Make Your Own Sounds

If music helps relax or distract you, play what sounds best to you. Be sure to bring a music player and your favorite music to the hospital. Sing, chant, pray, talk, or moan. Do what feels right for you.

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Allow Time To Adjust

If your contractions begin suddenly or suddenly get stronger, you may feel challenged and less in control. You will need to find a rhythm for dealing with this change. Consider changing your breathing or your position. It may take several contractions before you feel you are working well with your contractions.

Share Labor with a Companion

Having your partner, family member, friend or labor companion with you is important. He or she can:

- support your coping style
- help you relax: hold you, massage your tense muscles, rub your feet, stroke your hair, hold your hand, tell you to look into his or her eyes and focus
- time contractions and tell you how much time has passed (“15 seconds have passed... 20... 30...”)
- breathe with you
- praise you: “You’re doing great.”
“I’m so proud of you.”
- reassure you and help you relax between contractions
- bring you items that comfort you: ice chips, water, a cool washcloth, a warm blanket, more pillows, a clean gown
- stay calm — that will help you relax
- call the nurse or health care provider for you
- be your advocate. He or she can talk with your health care provider and the hospital staff about your wishes and concerns.

He or she can give you loving support and can be a real help keeping you focused on breathing and relaxation.

In addition, your labor companion helps you with comfort techniques, shares your wishes with the hospital staff, and relays information back to you.

Do It Your Way

Although you and your labor companion have practiced specific techniques, you may use others when you are in labor. Or, you may even make up new ways to cope. Do whatever works best and helps you deal with the contractions and rest in between them.

Use Cold to Dull Pain and Heat to Aid Relaxation and Comfort

Be sure to wrap cold or hot items in a towel to prevent hurting your skin.

- Try ice, a freezer pack or a bag of frozen vegetables such as peas.
- For warmth, use a hot water bottle, a heating patch, a heating pad or a cotton sock filled with rice and warmed in the microwave.
- Ask for a warmed blanket in the hospital.

Try Aromatherapy

Trigger relaxation with your sense of smell. Simple aromatherapy scents, like lavender, are probably best. Being in labor can make you extra sensitive to smells.

- When you’re home, light a scented candle or burn incense.
- When you’re going to the hospital, take a pillow scented with your favorite fragrance.
- At the hospital, you have the choice of using essential oil inhalers: lavender, sweet marjoram, mandarin or ginger. Check with your nurse before using a scent that fills the room.

Use Positive Labor Affirmations

You may find it helpful and comforting to say positive, encouraging things to yourself.

- Say them out loud or silently. You can also ask your labor companion to say them to you.
- Use phrases that are meaningful to you.

■ Here are some ideas:

- “My body knows what to do.”
- “I am helping my body do its job.”
- “I am relaxed and focused.”
- “I can breathe deeply and slowly.”
- “I am calm and confident.”
- “I am in rhythm with my body.”
- “I have all the energy I need to birth my baby.”
- “My partner and I are welcoming our baby with love.”

Use Touch to Relax

Ask your labor companion to give you a massage or a foot rub. Do effleurage (a light, circular fingertip massage) on your abdomen or thighs. Ask him or her to do the things that help you relax like stroke your hair or forehead, or rub your neck and shoulders.

Go to the Bathroom

Go to the bathroom every few hours. Don't wait until you feel you have to urinate. A full bladder makes labor more uncomfortable. It may also slow your baby's progress through your vagina (birth canal).

Use Your Mind-body Exercises

It is important to relax your mind and body during labor. This lowers your blood pressure and brings more oxygen to your uterus and baby. Use the breathing and guided imagery techniques you've learned.