

Easing Labor Pain Naturally

How does relaxation ease labor pain?

The body's **natural reaction** is to tense up when we feel pain. Then, the more you tense up, the worse pain can feel, creating more fear. The **fear-tension-pain cycle** can make labor longer and more painful. If you think of tightening your hand over a period of time and then trying to open it, you'll find that it is difficult because the muscles are so tense—your cervix reacts the same way. If you are constantly tightening your body during contractions it is harder for your body to “open” to allow baby to descend. By relaxing your muscles you're actually helping the **cervix dilate and efface** more efficiently!

Relaxation, Rhythm and Ritual

During labor, you can break the fear-tension-pain cycle using the 3 R's of Childbirth: Relaxation, Rhythm and Ritual.

- **Relax** during contractions in early labor, and find relaxation between contractions later in labor.
- Allow your body, mind, and breath to settle into a **rhythm** for each contraction
- Find and use a **ritual** that helps you cope with the contractions: swaying, rocking, chanting, breathing, etc. As labor progresses, you may find that you need to change your ritual and rhythm to match your labor.

If you find yourself struggling to relax between the intensity of contractions, scan over the body to see if you can release tension that the body is holding.

Some common tension areas:

- Jaw – are your teeth clenched?
- Shoulders – relax your neck and shoulders
- Hands – unclench your fists
- Feet – If sitting, are your toes on the ground but heels off the ground? This can cause cramping.
- Breath – are you holding your breath? Take a slow deep breath, it will keep the oxygen circulating your body and your baby's.



Pain perception

You can reduce your brain's perception of pain by **changing the way you think** about labor. When the body is relaxed, your brain can move from a place of fight or flight (fear) to one of calm peacefulness. The benefits of which include **reducing the feeling of pain**, lowering your blood pressure, slowing your heart rate, and slowing breathing pattern.

Simply by re-framing your thoughts to think of labor sensations as **positive, powerful, productive and manageable**, you allow your brain to enter a state of relaxation, making labor **feel less unpleasant**.



AROMATHERAPY:

A diffuser filled with your favorite essential oils can promote relaxation, ease tension and anxiety.

TRY: Relaxing oils like lavender, fennel and sage



HEAT PACKS:

Applying heat can help your body release pain relieving hormones known as endorphins.

TRY: For back labor, pain in the lower back or tail bone, a heat pack or hot damp towel can provide relief during contractions. To relieve pressure at your pubic bone (especially if you've suffered from Symphysis Pubis Dysfunction (SPD) in pregnancy), use a heat pack to relax and increase your mobility. Warm compresses on the neck or shoulders can help the muscles relax.



WARM WATER

Warm water from a bath or shower can not only help diminish pain, ease the mind, and promote comfort, but may also encourage labor to progress.

TRY: Sit in a warm tub, or direct the spray from the shower head to your lower back or where you are feeling discomfort.



MASSAGE:

Strong counter-pressure during contractions in addition to long massaging strokes throughout labor can provide relief from pain, decrease anxiety and improve mood.

TRY: Massaging the scalp, feet, legs, shoulders, hands and lower back.



CHANGING POSITIONS:

Changing positions during labor is a helpful way to keep labor progressing and may avoid unnecessary interventions. Being mobile throughout labor gives you the ultimate flexibility to get comfortable, and may also help baby get in the best position for birth.

TRY: Sitting on or leaning over a birthing ball, kneeling on all fours, squatting, walking or lunging.



BREATHING TECHNIQUES

Holding your breath is unfortunately a common response to pain. It can tire you out and slow labor down. But, breathing deeply relaxes your body, helps release tension and calm the mind.

TRY: Use breathing techniques that encourage deep, rhythmic breathing: abdominal breathing, counting during the breath, or adding mantras to your inhales and exhales.



CONSCIOUS MUSCLE RELAXATION

Muscle relaxation is both a mental exercise and a physical experience. Consciously relaxing your muscles can help ease tension, lessen fear, and diminish pain.

TRY: Starting at your head, consciously relax each muscle all the way down to your toes. Do this several times as you imagine more tension melting from your body and mind.



VOCALIZING

Vocalizing is making sounds: moans, groans, hums, songs, sighs and chants. Low, deep sounds are best as they help you relax while high-pitched sounds often make you feel out of control or frightened.

TRY: As you breathe out, make noises that come from your abdomen or chest, rather than throat. Consciously relax your mouth, jaw, and throat.

