

Breathing Techniques for First-Stage Labor

Purpose of Breathing Techniques.

- Provide oxygen to mom and baby. Beyond obvious benefits, this also reduces pain.
- Relaxation: Rhythmic breathing promotes physical relaxation by reducing muscle tension, and promotes emotional relaxation by reducing anxiety.
- Distraction: Breathing techniques provide a means for distracting the woman from the pain of labor, giving her something to focus on other than the contraction.

When to Use Breathing Techniques. No special breathing techniques are necessary in early labor. Begin using techniques when you can no longer walk and talk during contractions.

Always use the most basic technique possible, using the least effort required to manage each contraction. This helps prevent fatigue, and helps avoid the sensation of having already used all the techniques early on, leaving you with no new resources later in labor.

The Cleansing Breath

- How to: At the beginning of each contraction, and again at the end of each one, take a deep breath in through your nose, then exhale audibly through your mouth.
- Benefits: Welcoming breath gives both mother and baby an extra boost of oxygen, serves as a signal to relax and focus, and informs partner and support people that a contraction has begun. Closing breath serves as a release, informs support people that contraction has passed, and serves as a reminder to relax between contractions.

Slow, Relaxed, Abdominal Breathing

- How to: Inhale slowly through your nose, allowing your belly to expand first, then your chest. Exhale slowly through your mouth, pursing your lips. Breathing should be slow and relaxed, about half your normal rate. 6-9 breaths per minute.
- When to use: Use through as much of labor as possible.
- Benefits: Relaxing, slow, and effortless. Can help you feel safe and peaceful.

Light Breathing, a.k.a. Hee-Hee Breathing

- How to: Inhale and exhale through mouth. Lips are relaxed. On exhale, make a soft “hee” sound. Breathing shallower than in slow breathing. About 1 breath per second.
- When to use: When deep breathing no longer seems enough to help with contraction.
- Benefits: Helps with relaxation, distracts attention from contraction.

Hee-Hee-Blow Breathing

- How to: Like Hee-Hee, except do 1 to 5 “hee” breaths, then a blow (a deeper, slower exhale which releases tension). Find the number of “hees” that work best for you.
- Benefits of hee-blow: Provides a rhythm to breathing. Helps avoid hyperventilation.

Variable Hee-Blow Breathing

- How To: Partner randomly chooses a number of “hees” to be done (2, 3, 4). Example: he holds up 3 fingers, mom does 3 hees, he closes fist for “blow”, then raises 2 fingers
- When to Use: Good during transition, especially if the mom is feeling out of control.
- Benefits: Distraction. Woman focuses on partner and on counting the breaths.

Relaxation Techniques for Labor

Purpose of Relaxation Techniques. Relaxation is not just a passive activity, but an active, conscious release of tension. Doing physical relaxation techniques which release the voluntary muscles helps to reduce physical tension, reducing pain. It also can lead to a feeling of emotional well-being and security; this in turn reduces anxiety, which reduces our sensitivity to pain.

When to Use Relaxation Techniques. During early labor, it is easy to remain relaxed. This is a good time to begin consciously working on relaxation to help develop a good pattern that will stay with you as labor becomes more intense. Partners can help you to identify tension early on so you can release it rather than holding it and building on it. The techniques can be used throughout labor.

Tension Hold and Release. Beginning at your toes, and moving up to your head, flex each of your muscles in turn, making it as tight as possible, then relax it completely. This allows you to feel and recognize tension, and feel the relief of releasing tension. Begin with inhaling, then hold breath while tightening muscle, then relax while breathing out.

Passive Relaxation. Focus attention on your toes and feet. Just let go. Think how warm and relaxed they are. Focus on ankles and calves, think how loose and comfortable they are, and so on, up to your head, relaxing and releasing tension. Do deep, abdominal breathing.

Roving Body Check. Breathe in, choosing a muscle to focus on. Breathe out, releasing all the tension in the muscle with the exhale. Breathe in, moving your attention to another muscle. Exhale and relax. (Can be done with your partner calling out which muscle to focus on during the next breath.) Good quick relaxation method to use between contractions.

Touch Relaxation. During labor, it's wonderful if the partner can see where the mom is holding tension (e.g. jaw, eyes, hands, or shoulders) and touch her there to encourage her to relax: he might just rest his hand there, or stroke lightly, or do a firm massage. This is most effective if you've practiced in advance. Practice tensing muscles, then having him touch the muscle. You release the tension, imagine that it's flowing out of your body through his hand. When you begin practicing, tell him which muscle you are tensing. When you have practiced more, try playing a game, where he has to guess which muscle you are tensing.

Practicing Relaxation Techniques and Breathing Techniques before Labor

When practicing these techniques the first few times, make your environment as conducive as possible: dim lights, soft music, no interruptions. As you become more familiar with the techniques, and better able to reach a relaxed state, try using them in different positions, doing them while actively doing other activities (driving, cooking, talking on the phone) and when feeling stressed. These techniques are helpful not only during labor, but in all of life.

Deep, abdominal breathing can be practiced any time and in any place. It's also important to practice the other breathing techniques until you become comfortable with them, and can use each for two minutes without feeling out of breath. If you begin to feel lightheaded or dizzy, take a cleansing breath, and start over. If necessary, rebreathe your air by cupping your hands over nose and mouth, or breathing into a paper bag.

To help yourself remember to practice techniques, set up cues. For example, every time you're reading, do deep abdominal breathing. When you're at a red light, do hee-hee breathing. During TV commercials, do hee-blow. When waking up in the morning, do passive relaxation. When your partner's had a hard day, use touch relaxation.