



Chiropractic Newsletter

Well-Being

The Power of Breath

I had been training, attending births, and working toward my birth doula certification for more than two years before I birthed my first child. So, I approached my first birth excited and engaged in the process, and I largely muscled my way through labor, using all my doula tricks: marching, moving, forceful breathing. I said to myself, “I am doing this!” while my body progressed naturally (without intervention), but I forced the labor process along with gumption and energy to make my cervix open and allow my baby to be born.

My breath during this birth was a series of pants and forceful exhales. I marched my feet through my contractions, or forcefully swished my hips in the bathtub and relied on rhythm to ease the intensity. My intention for labor largely came from my doula training and experience. I knew how to “do birth” in my mind, and I approached the experience predominantly from my mental body. However, in my effort to “do birth,” I failed to tune in to my body and respond accordingly.

My labor lasted 16 hours, including two-and-a-half hours of very hard pushing. My baby presented “military style,” which simply means she didn’t tuck her chin coming through the birth canal, so the top of her head, rather than her crown, presented first. Once she was born, I felt completely triumphant and utterly exhausted. My recovery was long, and I couldn’t find my pelvic floor muscles for a good six months postpartum. Getting back to myself mentally and emotionally took about that long as well.

As my second pregnancy progressed, I picked up Marie Mongan’s book, *HypnoBirthing*, for the first time. I came to the chapter on breathing techniques and read this passage:

...When your uterus surges, it rises. Slow breathing helps you to work in concert with that upward movement of the uterus as you breathe your abdomen up to the highest possible height—like filling an inner balloon. This maximizes the wave of vertical muscles, causing them to work more efficiently in drawing up



the lower circular muscles, and thinning and opening the cervix. The assist that this gives to both sets of muscles shortens the length of the surge, as well as the length of labor.

Could I really create a shorter, easier labor by simply breathing? The scientific idea of aligning with my uterine muscles for maximum efficiency combined with the possibility of a shorter, easier birth intrigued me, so I decided to put it to the test. For my second birth, the only thing I was going to “do” was breathe. I wasn’t going to waste any energy “doing birth” or “making it happen.” Instead, I was going to match my breathing to my contractions as best I could, and surrender to all else. Surrender every muscle and simply support my uterus in doing its thing.

The proof is in the pudding. I did, in fact, create a shorter, easier birth the second time around, with a baby who was 2 pounds heavier. My second labor was five hours total (11 hours shorter than my first), and my time pushing fell from two-and-a-half hours to 10 minutes! I came away from my second birth experience wondering why the process had worked so well. These questions propelled me to look into the anatomy of the uterus and the science of labor.

During contractions, the muscle fibers at the fundus (the top of the uterus) get shorter and thicker, while the muscle fibers at the bottom of the uterus lengthen and move up.

This all corresponds with the baby moving down toward the birth canal.

As Mongan points out in *HypnoBirthing*, “Oxygen is the most important fuel for the working muscles in the uterus.” The best way to support the uterus is to inhale as it contracts. Take in as much breath as possible, as slowly as possible, in order to oxygenate the muscle fibers and the baby. Then, follow this up with an equally slow exhale. Maximize your lung capacity by utilizing abdominal breathing. Abdominal breathing has many names, including slow breathing, belly breathing, diaphragmatic breathing, and Ujjayi/Yoga breathing. The concept is the same: Using the diaphragm in a slow and controlled manner, expand the belly with your inhale and allow the belly to shrink with your exhale. This method of breathing fills the belly rather than causing the shoulders to move up and down. When breathing makes the shoulders move, it is shallow breathing that uses only the upper lobes of the lungs. Abdominal breathing maximizes all five lobes of the lungs. To practice abdominal breathing:

1. Put one hand on your chest and other hand on your belly, over your belly button.
 2. Blow out all the air.
 3. Inhale slowly, focusing on filling your belly only, instead of your chest. Your hand on your belly will move out with your inhale, while your hand on your chest will stay still.
 4. If the hand on your chest also moves, simply coach yourself to let the air go into your belly rather than your chest
 5. Have a partner or doula watch and coach you to move your breath down into your belly, if that’s useful.
- Researchers suggest that breathing for pain relief during labor works by interrupting the transmission of pain signals by focusing on something positive. It may also release endorphins and help the laboring person

reframe their thinking about labor to be positive, productive, and manageable.

Like most things from Mother Nature, one gift has multiple remedies. Breathing is no different. In addition to transforming how we deliver our babies, this type of abdominal breathing “alters your brainwaves in a positive way, increases your relaxation response, decreases your stress hormones, decreases your blood pressure, and increases your oxygen levels,” reports Rebecca Dekker of Evidence Based Birth, in her article “Breathing for Pain Relief During Labor.” The findings were based on the results of electroencephalography (EEG) studies of abdominal breathing.

Inside the birth community, we talk about the importance of breath and breathing through labor. When we use it to support the uterus, we transform it from a nice thought into a powerful tool for faster, easier labors—and we are in the business of supporting faster, easier labors.

—Meredith Ashton, C.D.
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