TOOLS FOR SUPPORTING NATURAL CHILDBIRTH

This Whole Health tool includes information to support a Whole Health approach to childbirth. Research is reviewed regarding continuous support during labor, high-touch and noninvasive measures, and pain relief approaches including waterbirth, sterile water papules, positioning, acupuncture and hypnosis, other mind-body techniques, and warm packs.

CONTINUOUS SUPPORT DURING LABOR

“Historically, women have been attended and supported by other women during labor. However, in recent decades in hospitals worldwide, continuous support during labor has become the exception rather than the routine. Concerns about the consequent dehumanization of women’s birth experiences have led to calls for a return to continuous support, by women for women, during labor.”[1] To come to this conclusion, Cochrane reviewed over 16 trials of continuous support during labor, which included 13,391 women. This support should include continuous presence of a birth companion who provides hands-on comfort and encouragement.[1]

Studies have shown that continuous support during labor:

- Reduces the chances of having a caesarean section
- Reduces epidural or other analgesic use
- Reduces use of oxytocin (Pitocin)
- Reduces the duration of labor
- Reduces the use of forceps and vacuum extraction
- Reduces the chances of health complications and hospitalizations
- Reduces dissatisfaction with the birth experience

Interestingly, continuous labor support was also found to be of even greater benefit when the support provider was not a member of the hospital staff, when the support began early in labor, and when labor occurred in settings in which epidural analgesia was not routinely available.[1] In most hospitals around the country, it is the labor and delivery nurse, a member of the hospital staff, who provides support to the laboring woman. This support cannot be continuous by the very nature of hospital nursing duties. Even if each patient has her own nurse, shift change occurs, and nurses have increasing demands on their time, including chart documentation, blood draws, and vital signs. They are also required to keep the physician, who is almost always absent from the bedside, up-to-date with regards to the patient’s progress. Doulas and midwives are other options, and both are likely to be beneficial in the current hospital environment.

MIDWIFERY

Certified nurse-midwives (CNMs) are registered nurses who have completed graduate-level training in midwifery and passed a national certification exam. Midwifery is legal in
all 50 states and the District of Columbia. They can prescribe medication in 50 states and can practice in homes, birth centers, clinics, and hospitals. In 2006, nurse-midwives attended 11.3% of all vaginal births in the United States.[2] Insurance coverage for midwifery services is common, but availability may vary, depending on local resources.

The midwives' model of care differs from the medical model, which physicians practice in hospital settings. The midwives model of care is based on the fact that pregnancy and birth are normal life processes. This model of care includes:

- Monitoring the physical, psychological, and social well-being of the mother throughout the childbearing cycle.
- Providing the mother with individualized education, counseling, and prenatal care.
- Offering continuous hands-on assistance during labor and delivery
- Minimizing technological interventions
- Identifying and referring women who require obstetrical attention.

Cochrane published a meta-analysis of 11 trials in 2008 comparing birth, neonatal, and postpartum outcomes of midwives versus physicians.[3] Midwives outperformed physicians in almost all areas. Women who delivered under the care of a midwife were more likely to have a vaginal birth, initiate breastfeeding, feel in control of their labor, and have a shorter hospital stay. These women were also less likely to use analgesia during labor, have an episiotomy, have an instrumented delivery, or experience fetal loss before 24 weeks gestation. Physicians and midwives had equal rates of fetal loss/neonatal death after 24 weeks gestation. These findings led Cochrane to conclude that all women should be offered midwifery care.

A recent publication highlighted successful aspects of midwifery care. "Evidence-Based Maternity Care: What It Is and What It Can Achieve," co-authored by Carol Sakala and Maureen P. Corry of the nonprofit Childbirth Connection, analyzed hundreds of the most recent studies and systematic reviews of maternity care. The 100-page report was issued collaboratively by Childbirth Connection, the Reforming States Group (a voluntary association of state-level health policymakers), and Milbank Memorial Fund and released on October 8, 2008.[4] The report emphasized the dangers of over-use of high-tech interventions by obstetricians and the under-utilization of low-tech measures to improve outcomes, which included the use of non-surgeon care-providers, such as midwives and family physicians.

DOULAS

It is often difficult or impossible for physicians to be continuously present to support laboring women, due to the varied commitments their jobs entail. Acknowledging the benefits women gain from this type of support, many physicians may wish to guide their patients to a trained labor support person. A model that may be feasible is employing the use of a doula.

Doula is a Greek word meaning “a woman who serves.” A birth doula is a specially trained birth companion, not a friend or loved one, who provides labor support. She performs no
clinical tasks, nor does she give medical advice. She is simply present to provide hands-on support to the laboring woman.

A randomized controlled trial looking at doulas was done with 420 nulliparous middle-income or upper-income women, accompanied by their male partners.[5] Women were randomized to either receive doula support during labor, or to receive the standard support of nursing staff and their spouses only. Obstetric care was provided by private obstetricians. In line with what Cochrane has described for other types of continuous support in labor, the results of doula use were positive. The c-section rate was 13% in the doula group and 25% among the control group. For women undergoing induction, c-section rates were 13% versus 59%. The doula group also had a lower rate of epidural analgesia: 65% versus 76%. There have been several other studies which have had similar results in different groups of women.

**HIGH-TOUCH, NONINVASIVE MEASURES**

Many practices that have been proven effective are underused in today's maternity care for healthy low-risk women. They include:[4]

- Prenatal vitamins
- Use of midwife or family physician
- Continuous presence of a companion for the mother during labor
- Upright and side-lying positions during labor and delivery, which are associated with less severe pain than lying down on one’s back
- Vaginal birth after caesarean (VBAC) for most women
- Early mother-baby skin-to-skin contact

**PAIN RELIEF IN LABOR**

Whether or not a woman has the benefit of continuous support during labor, there are other non-medication approaches that may aid pain relief. Research is sparse for most non-medication approaches. Some methods which are potentially effective include the use of warm water emersion, sterile water papules, positioning, acupuncture, self-hypnosis, and warm packs.

**WATERBIRTH**

Warm water emersion, or waterbirth, has been used to aid labor for centuries and has recently gained popularity in the United States. Proponents of waterbirth claim that it aids in relaxation, provides pain relief, lowers adrenalin levels, and improves blood supply to the placenta. Most of these claims have not been studied.

One large prospective study of 513 patients who requested waterbirth found that patients who labored in water used less analgesia/anesthesia during labor, had a shorter duration of first and second stages of labor, and had lower rates perineal tears and episiotomies.[6] No differences were seen in APGAR scores, fetal arterial and venous pH, admission rate to
NICU, or infection rate. A 2006 Cochrane review of waterbirth research concluded that more studies are needed to better-assess safety and efficacy.[7]

**STERILE WATER PAPULES**

The use of sterile water papules is a lesser-known technique to help reduce the pain of back labor. It involves injecting 0.1 mL of sterile water into four areas just under the skin of the lower back. (To see the points, do a web search of “sterile water papules.”) This is thought to provide nerve stimulation that distracts from pain. It can provide relief for two to three hours, and it can be repeated. There has been one randomized, placebo-controlled trial of 272 women which showed effectiveness and safety.[8]

**POSITIONING**

Positioning of the laboring woman’s body has long been the cornerstone of midwifery skills for facilitating delivery, as well as for aiding in pain management. There are entire books written on the subject of positioning the laboring woman, but little research has been done in this area. A systematic review was published in 2002, which concluded that an upright position in stage I of labor aided in pain relief and the same was found for squatting in stage II.[9] It was also concluded that squatting facilitated a faster delivery. For more information on positioning the laboring woman, *The Labor Progress Handbook* by Simkin and Ancheta is a good resource.[10]

**ACUPUNCTURE AND SELF-HYPNOSIS**

A Cochrane review was published in 2006, which looked at a few selected methods of non-pharmacologic pain relief in labor.[11] The reviewers included 14 trials involving 1,537 women. They concluded that women taught self-hypnosis used less pharmacological analgesia including epidural analgesia. The trials of acupuncture also showed a decreased need for pain relief. No objective benefit was seen for women receiving aromatherapy or audio analgesia. Acupuncture use during labor may be covered under some insurance plans.

**OTHER MIND-BODY TECHNIQUES FOR LABOR PAIN REDUCTION**

Women may choose to practice relaxation techniques during pregnancy in anticipation of labor. Yoga, Guided Imagery, prayer, meditation, and various breathing techniques are tools for self-relaxation. Many communities offer prenatal yoga classes, which can also be a nice way for pregnant women to form community and stay physically active.

**WARM PACKS**

Lastly, the use of warm packs is commonplace in most hospitals in the United States, and the data on their benefit is worth noting. One large, randomized-controlled trial of 717 women found that the application of warm packs to the perineum starting late in the second stage of labor significantly reduced the risk of 3rd and 4th degree laceration.[12] Warm pack use also reduced pain during birth and in the immediate postpartum.
was also some indication that they may reduce the risk of urinary incontinence at three months postpartum, although the data for this was not as strong.

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**REFERENCE**