

Giving birth is one of the most intense, dramatic and awesome experiences a woman may have. It's also as natural as the baby being born: it's not an operation, nor is it a medical procedure. Of course, medical intervention is vital when there are problems. In any normal pregnancy you're likely to feel fearful and anxious, but you can be confident you're capable of coping with the physical demands of labour. There's also a vast range of complementary therapies that can offer natural solutions to many of the difficulties associated with giving birth and can maximise the birthing experience.

Home birth

The comfort of familiar surroundings makes giving birth at home an appealing option for many women. Home births are largely unsupported by the medical establishment but if you're a low-risk pregnant woman you can choose to give birth at home without placing yourself or your baby at risk. The World Health Organization has found that home births are considered safe for healthy women. If you do opt for a home birth, it's recommended that you enlist the support of a trained midwife. The term "midwife" comes from two

the cycles of life all around you. Back at home, care for yourself, rest and prepare lovingly for the due date.

Week 34: Ensure that you regularly get a good night's sleep and, if possible, take afternoon naps to rest your body. Visualise your baby, welcome him or her to your world and send him or her your love and encouragement. Eat iron-rich foods. Massage your perineum daily before the birth to help prevent tears. Soak in the bath to soften the area. Place natural plant oil on your thumb or index finger and place in the vagina at least five centimetres. Gently stretch the area in a U-shaped motion until you feel a tingling sensation, release and massage, repeat 5-10 times. Learn to love raspberry leaf tea, as a cup a day can help to tone the uterus. Put together a complementary birth kit — see sidebar.

Week 35: Go over any acupressure or shiatsu points you may wish to use during labour with your support person. Do your pelvic floor exercises daily. Practise gentle stretching to help prepare your pelvis for labour, such as lying on your back on the floor with your legs stretched up a wall. Gently open your legs wide, keeping your hips as close to the wall as you can. Hold for a few minutes and then gently tread your feet down the wall and roll onto your side to relax.

THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION HAS FOUND THAT HOME BIRTHS ARE CONSIDERED SAFE FOR HEALTHY WOMEN.

words that mean "with woman". An experienced midwife will be there with you throughout the labour. Her supervision, encouragement and advice will help to care for and empower you in your own birthing experience. If there are any problems she's there to offer solutions or detect the need for medical assistance if and when required. Generally, midwives who are available to assist at a home birth, or in a birthing centre, have developed confidence in the process, justified by their experience, and are committed to helping you achieve a natural birth. If you do opt for a home birth, your challenge will be to find an experienced independent midwife who can help you through the process. Escalating insurance costs means there are now few midwives able to support home births. For more information, contact the Australian Society for Independent Midwives on (02) 9416 7289 or Homebirth International Australia Pty Ltd on (02) 9416 7224.

Birthing centres

Birthing centres, which are usually attached to a hospital, provide a compromise for women who want to give birth naturally but still have easy access to hospital facilities. Inside, they're designed like a bedroom to help you feel more comfortable, and sometimes they come with a spa. You're encouraged to actively participate in the birthing process and can bring your own support team. The emphasis is on a natural process, but if you call for additional pain relief, nitrous oxide is generally available. Birthing centres are only available for low-risk deliveries. According to hospital rules, if you're at risk due to health issues or complications that arise during pregnancy, such as malpresentation or being more than two weeks overdue, you will have to transfer to the hospital antenatal clinic.

Preparation

To help you achieve an optimum birthing experience you can provide yourself with the best support available — you. Giving birth is a dramatic experience, so don't be too hard on yourself if you feel worried or fearful as your pregnancy progresses. You can have confidence that your body is well equipped for what's ahead, but if need be, gather strength. Spend time out in nature whenever you can and, when you do, take the time to really observe and connect with

Week 36: You might wish to try different remedies to help you through these last few weeks — mugwort flower remedy may encourage the baby to engage, olive flower is a remedy for exhaustion, hornbeam helps if you feel yourself doubting your ability to cope, and use mimulus if you're beginning to feel afraid.

Week 37: Rest. Your body is carrying a heavy load, so there's no need to push yourself. Take small amounts of vitamin C and zinc, both necessary for hormone production before delivery.

Week 38: Start to eat a diet rich in carbohydrates. Increase your intake of raspberry leaf tea to four cups a day. Eat plenty of magnesium- and calcium-rich foods to fortify the muscles ready for contractions during labour. If there has been a history of late births, talk to your healthcare practitioner about taking blue cohosh. This herb can be used after week 37, but only if there are no Braxton-Hicks contractions. Rather than take vitamin K supplements, which can overly enhance blood-clotting mechanisms, eat plenty of foods rich in vitamin K. Stinging nettle tea is rich in both vitamin K and iron. Co-enzyme Q10 is sometimes recommended as it can improve the ability of muscle cells to use oxygen and metabolise energy. Now is a good time to start taking the homoeopathic remedy arnica 6c to help prevent bruising after birth — seek advice from a qualified homoeopath.

Week 40: In consultation with your practitioner, regular acupressure can relieve anxiety and abdominal discomfort. Some points will help to reduce haemorrhaging and strengthen the uterus ready for labour. Drink fennel tea to increase milk flow. Practice relaxation techniques and the labour positions.

Breech babies

Breech babies will often turn of their own accord before the birth, but there are some alternative methods available to help this process along. Acupuncture treatment can turn breech babies. You can supplement this with inverted yoga positions in which your head is level with or lower than the rest of your body, all the time visualising your baby turning. Swimming, particularly breast stroke, is also helpful as it reduces any downward pressure on the uterus. Daily 20-minute walks that encourage the baby to move will also help, as will the homoeopathic remedy pulsatilla 30c taken three to five times a day for 10 days or until your baby turns.

Always check with your midwife in case there is a significant reason for your baby being breech. Try natural remedies only if you are healthy, not carrying twins and have never had a caesarean section. Attempts to turn a baby using manual manipulation must be conducted only by skilled obstetricians. They're rarely successful and can cause damage to the placenta.

Premature labour

If your labour has started prematurely you'll need to go to hospital where your baby can be monitored. If there is a problem, your baby may have more chance of survival if it's born now rather than later. For this reason, there's no therapy as such to halt a premature labour, but there are general self-help guidelines you can follow to try to avoid it. If you're severely at risk, you'll need to have complete bed rest and abstain from sexual activity. Make sure you drink lots of water during hot weather to avoid any risk of premature labour caused by heat stress. Drink calming herbal teas such as chamomile or valerian and keep the rescue remedy on hand in case you start to panic. Magnesium supplements will also help to relax any muscle tension, as will herbal tonics containing cramp bark, valerian and nettles.

Induction

Due to the physical stress caused by the hard and fast rush of artificial inductions and the risks associated with the synthetic oxytocin preparation often used to facilitate them, a natural solution is preferable. If you are overdue, you may wish to consider asking your doctor to hold off on an artificial induction. Seek advice from your midwife about professional complementary therapy options available to assist you, but here is an overview:

Acupuncture: Treatments are available to kick-start labour.

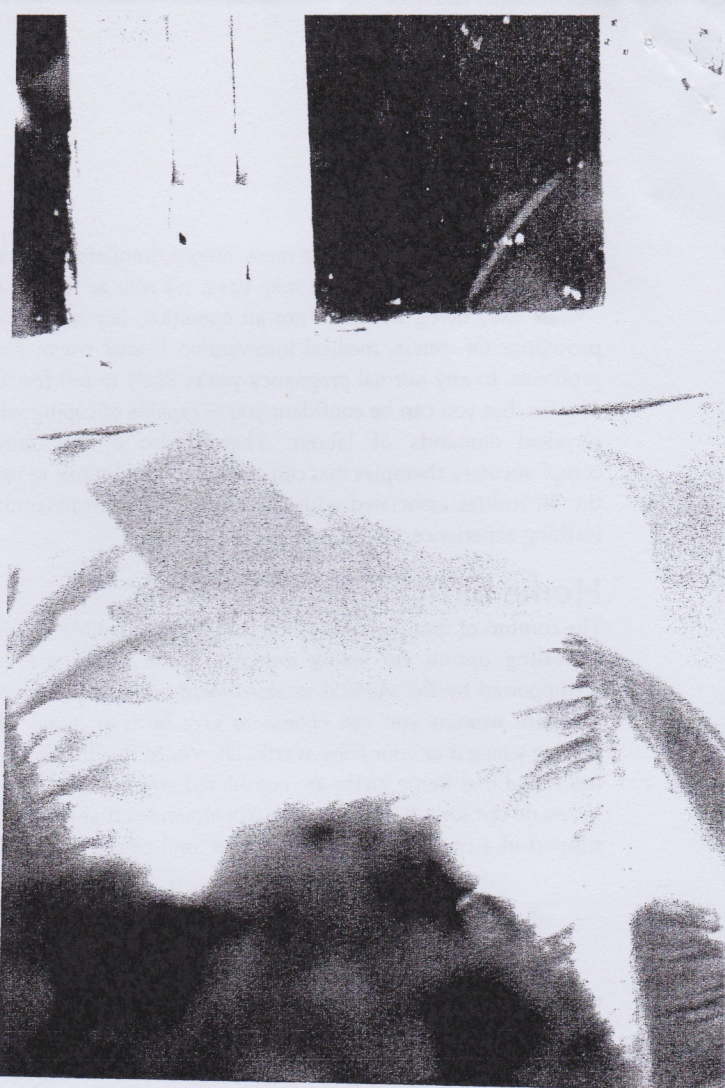
Homoeopathy: The homoeopathic remedy potassium phosphate has a reputation for bringing on an overdue labour. *Caulophyllum 30c* is often recommended to be taken once a day for 10 days before your due date and then during labour every two hours, with a maximum of six doses in each 24 hours until contractions are regular. If this is not effective, take the 200c dose every half hour for two to three doses. The following remedy also helps to soften the cervix: *gelsemium 30c* every half-hour for six to eight doses if *caulophyllum* is ineffective. This remedy is also used for ineffectual contractions.

Reflexology: Treatment can be applied to pituitary reflexes.

Cranial osteopathy: This can stimulate the pituitary gland to produce hormones important for labour.

Herbalism: Drink raspberry leaf tea four times a day. If you're overdue, three to eight drops of the herbal blue cohosh fluid extract can be taken, in warm water, every hour for up to four hours or until your contractions are regular. The herbs pennyroyal and tansy are traditionally used to bring on a period and can also assist. Pennyroyal oil can be used in a burner or inhaled. The herb schisandra may be used in conjunction to help bring on a delayed labour and increase infrequent or weak contractions.

Physical stimulation: Standing or squatting will put more pressure on your cervix and encourage it to open. Keep active, go for long, gentle walks and when home, spend as much time as possible crouching in the squatting position. Stimulating your nipples in preparation for breastfeeding will also release hormones that soften the cervix and stimulate uterine contractions. With the aid of an oil or cream, gently roll and squeeze your nipples. If your partner is able to help, all the better. Slow and sensual lovemaking leading to orgasm is not only a great emotional and physical release, it can also help to bring on labour. You can continue between contractions but it's recommended that you stop once they become two minutes apart lest the process overtakes you.



Labour

With a nine-month lead-up, you might be quite worked up by the time labour arrives. All your preparation will help to reassure you as the process begins. If you find your anxiety levels building, take a few slow, deep, calming breaths and seek distraction or relief from items in your complementary birth kit (see sidebar). If you're not planning to use anaesthetic, prepare and pack fresh food snacks to help sustain your energy levels through the hours ahead. Gather your support team, stretch out any tension in your body and start to practise deep body relaxation techniques such as meditation and visualisation.

Check with your midwife whether it's safe for you to eat and drink during labour. Generally, as labour starts, it's best to drink plenty of fluids and stay mobile but rest frequently. Eat snacks rather than meals. Build up energy supplies by eating plenty of carbohydrates. Have healthy bites on hand, like sandwiches, small jacket potatoes, fruit, pasta or rice salads, crackers, cereal bars, sardines on toast and nuts and raisins to give you an energy boost.

Lying flat will slow your labour, so for as long as you can stay awake, stay upright, go for a walk and assume the squatting position. Once you reach second stage, drape a hot towel over your perineum to bring more blood into the tissues and make the skin more resilient, thus helping to avoid perineal tears. At various stages, massage your perineum; for example, when the baby's head is emerging. Let your midwife guide you through, particularly when labour reaches its final stages, and it's important not to push too hard.

If you are frightened and in pain, your body will release adrenaline, which will make you agitated, increase the pain and slow the progress of the labour. Medicated pain relief does create a risk to the health of your baby. If you would prefer not to take medication during labour, you may decide instead to have a support team on hand who can help to calm you and offer alternative pain relief,



particularly through the transition period when there are likely going to be moments when you feel like you can't take any more. Acupuncture needles inserted into your ear can help to stimulate the release of endorphins. Acupuncture needles inserted in your sacral, lower spine region can ease backache.

Heat can also help to speed things up, so hot baths and showers may be useful. Add some lavender or mandarin oil to the bath and massage your belly. Water around the body soothes nerve endings and relaxes muscles in the skin, thus reducing stress. For this reason many women desire to give birth in a warm bath or spa. Sanitary precautions can make this difficult to achieve in hospital, but check with your midwife about the best options available to you.

Castor oil can be used as a compress on your lower abdomen. Saturate a wool or cotton flannel, folded into four, with cold-pressed castor oil. Place directly on the skin of your lower abdomen and cover with a piece of plastic. Apply a hot water bottle or hot pack over the compress and then a blanket or towel over the top to keep it in place. Relax for 30-60 minutes and take the opportunity to rest, meditate and listen to music. As a purgative, castor oil may be taken internally: one tablespoon of oil taken with orange juice, repeated hourly for three doses.

In general, a slow massage will calm and a brisk one will stimulate. For at least 20 minutes, use firm but gentle strokes, using the flat of the hand and stroke towards the heart to ease tension. Essential oils can also be helpful: lavender to ease pain, mandarin to lift spirits and clary sage to improve contractions in an attempt to speed up a painful, protracted labour. (Clary sage is potent, so seek guidance from a practitioner.) Other essential oils that can be used include chamomile, eucalyptus and frankincense.

A homoeopath may be able to attend the birth or give advice over the phone, having prepared various remedies for you in advance. Seek professional guidance if you wish to self-minister

Birth kit

- Aromatherapy burner and candles
- Portable stereo with relaxing music CDs.
- Labour massage oil to reduce discomfort. Depending on your needs, you may want a range of essential oils: mandarin, jasmine or rose (to lift mood), lavender and chamomile (to relax), peppermint (for nausea). Diluted clary sage oil massaged into the abdomen can help to release a retained placenta.
- Vitamin E cream or jojoba oil to help to massage the perineum.
- Energy drinks specially formulated for labour, fruit juices, calming herbal teas.
- Facial spray to cool, refresh and revive.
- Distractions for early labour, such as magazines, books, walkman, cards.
- You may wish to add a selection of helpful herbal tinctures or homoeopathic or flower remedies.
- Heat packs if not supplied by the hospital — try wheat, hot water bottles, blue gel sports packs or hot towels.

homoeopathics with a kit on hand. Here are some useful remedies: **Aconite 6c** for contractions that occur in rapid succession with acute back pain.

Pulsatilla 6c for back pain that is cutting and spasmodic, **belladonna 6c** when pain extends from the back down to the spine.

Chamomilla 6c for spasmodic and abdominal pain.

Gelsemium 6c for cramps.

Caulophyllum 6c to encourage contractions.

Coffea 6c if despairing.

Kali carb. 6c if obstinate and stuck, **secale 6c** if distressed and wanting to push.

Pulsatilla 6c if you feel weepy and moody.

Arnica 6c to relieve after-pains.

Bach flower remedies can also help the birthing process. Remedies include:

Rescue remedy to stave off panic.

Mugwort flower remedy, which encourages contractions and promotes birthing.

Walnut helps you to adjust to the rapid physical changes.

Cherry plum if you've had enough and want to give up.

Five flower formula for fear and panic.

Olive helps in a lengthy labour.

There are many useful herbs for labour. Some include:

Black cohosh: This herb helps to soften the cervix. Use 10 drops of the fluid extract under the tongue every hour for three or four hours, or until the cervix is soft.

Golden seal: This herb is oxytocic and will stimulate contractions.

Southernwood and **beth root:** These herbs are traditionally used to speed up and ease labour

Ginger and **mugwort:** These are warming herbs that can help to increase uterine circulation.

Raspberry and **squaw vine:** These herbs help all aspects of labour.

Hospital

Giving birth in a hospital labour ward may not be your first choice, but if it comes to it, there's no need to feel like a failed birther. Better that both you and your baby are alive and well. Whether you opt for a hospital birth in the first instance or find yourself in a labour ward as a result of medical complications, the best way to avoid any unnecessary trauma is to prepare yourself by becoming familiar with the environment and its procedures beforehand. During pregnancy, find out as much as you can about the hospital facilities available to

you. If you choose to give birth in a labour ward, visit the hospital and see how you feel there. Do you feel welcome and comfortable? The sensitivity of the medical staff may hearten you, so give them a chance to help you overcome any fears.

If you find you still lack confidence in the facilities, you may wish to look for an alternative. Some hospitals are making efforts to support your choice to have a natural birth. Your doctor will normally be with you only during the final stages of labour, but you may be able to have your midwife and support team with you the whole time so you're not left alone for long periods. In some hospitals, you may also be able to move around during labour and opt to give birth on a mat or a beanbag rather than a bed. Check whether your hospital offers these alternatives. You might also like to know whether they offer sedation as a matter of course or will support your desire for a natural delivery.

The likelihood of intervention is higher in a hospital, so you should find out as much as you can about how and why intervention is likely to occur. Take the time to research and write your own birth plan. This will assist both you and your support team to make informed decisions during labour and can help to ensure that your wishes are adhered to throughout. Seek as much knowledge as you can about which procedures and interventions may need to occur at the various stages of labour. For example, will you need to come to hospital as soon as the labour starts or can you stay at home until the labour has progressed further? If you go into hospital when your membranes rupture you may be able to return home for some time if it looks like there's a long labour ahead. Can you ask that they refrain from offering you pain relief as a matter of course to avoid unnecessary temptation when your contractions are most severe? Can the lighting or air-conditioning be altered to suit you? Are you able to choose who you want to be in the

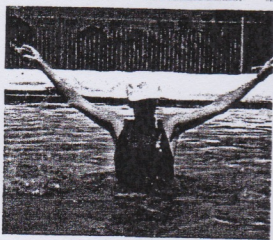
delivery room? How long will they let each phase of labour progress by itself before they intervene? Will you accept an artificial induction? Given research findings that tears through the perineum heal much better than cuts, do you want an episiotomy?

What sort of pain relief will you choose if need be and which do you prefer to avoid? Nitrous oxide can leave you feeling sick and disorientated if you have too much. Pethidine hydrochloride and epidurals can stress your baby, leaving him or her groggy with depressed respiration, difficulty sucking and, in some cases, a slow recovery from foetal distress. They will also slow your contractions and can lead to damage of the perineum caused by the necessity for a forceps delivery if still active during the final stage of labour. As your anaesthetist should explain, epidurals also carry risks of serious side-effects such as paraplegia. Under what circumstances would you agree to a caesarian section? If you cannot be awake during the birth, who else will be there to welcome your baby to the world and hold him or her up to your chest to feel your heartbeat? Except in cases of emergency, midwives and obstetricians cannot administer any treatment without your informed consent. Do you have any right to seek a second opinion? Once your baby is born, can you ask that you keep holding the baby and accompany him or her for any tests? At what point do you want the umbilical cord to be cut? It doesn't need to be cut straight away. If the medical staff waits for five or 10 minutes, the baby is usually breathing well of its own accord and the cord can be cut and tied.

Find out what your support team can do to help you achieve the sort of birthing experience you desire. Some hospitals have a ready-written plan available which you can modify, or devise your own if you prefer. It's vital that everyone involved gets time to discuss this with you, so

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prepare it well in advance. Keep reminder copies for the final weeks of your pregnancy and a copy to give to staff in the delivery room when you arrive at the hospital for the birth. Be aware that if they change shift while you are in labour, you may also need to brief the relieving medical staff. And, by the way, if you're having difficulty with a particular birth attendant, you can always request another one.

In the end, the best judge of what works for you is you. You may prefer to focus on one pain-relieving technique such as acupuncture or hypnosis, but there's no need to limit your options. Feel free to have as much pain relief on hand as you desire. Many mothers who have given birth naturally will attest that the pain, while more extreme than any other pain they have known, was nonetheless a wonderful and

powerful experience because of the knowledge that it was bringing their new child into the world. Natural birth is possible. You can do this. Your body is made to do this. Have faith in yourself and trust the confidence of your support team in your ability to manage. Let go, relax and let the rest happen. If, by chance, unexpected complications do occur, don't judge yourself. This is not usual, but it's not necessarily a disaster. By all means, grieve for your dreams of a natural birth, but there's no need to top up your pain with the added burden of feeling you've failed to achieve your expectations. Life does not always play out the way we expect and often the best healing is to accept and honour, as best we can, life as it is.

If delivery goes as planned and you achieve a natural birth you'll know on a very deep level just how strong you really are, both physically and emotionally. Once your baby is born, you'll be able to feel your own connection with the cycles of life on our planet. Your supporters will know they were able to take an intimate and active role in helping you through this process and welcoming your new baby into the world. Most importantly, you and your baby will be more able to bond and recover quickly to go on and enjoy your reward — your life together.

For more information, see *Your Baby, Your Way* by Deborah Cooper and *Natural Pregnancy* by Zita West. ☺

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