Comfort Measures During Labour

Every woman’s childbirth experience is unique. Learning about and practising comfort measures will help you make informed choices. Your partner/support person plays an important role by helping to create a calm environment, being your advocate and updating family members and friends.

The comfort measures described here can be effective during early labour when you are most likely still at home, and also during active labour when you may be in the hospital or in the care of a midwife. You may know other comfort measures you’d also like to try.

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**Position Changes and Movement**

Changing your position in various ways can help your baby move through the birth canal and also ease the pain of your contractions. Try a new position about every 30 to 60 minutes or when your current one is no longer comfortable.

- Walk / use stairs
- Slow-dance with your partner
- Stand and lean against a wall
- Squat
- Get on your hands and knees
- Lie on your side
- Kneel
- Sway
- Pelvic rock
- Sit in a rocking chair
- Lean forward on the back of a chair
- Use a birth ball – sit, lean, sway or roll back and forth (have someone with you for support)

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**Water**

A warm shower (avoid too hot) is often soothing and helps relieve tension. Let the spray flow over your abdomen, lower back or wherever it feels best. A tub bath is also useful and considered safe before your water has broken. Be sure to have someone nearby if you use the shower or bath, as your contractions may intensify when you relax. Your support person may need a change of clothes.

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**Hot and Cold**

A hot pack or water bottle is relaxing and may also ease discomfort. A cool pack or face cloth on the forehead or the nape of the neck may feel good especially during active labour, transition and pushing when you may feel flushed and sweaty. Alternating hot and cold can be soothing. Do not place heat or ice directly on the skin.

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**Touch and Massage**

Some women like to be touched during labour. Others find touch irritating. Partners – always let the labouring woman know when you are going to touch her.

You may like massage at some points during your labour, and not at all during other times. Practise at home with different types of touch and massage, lotion and massage tools. You may prefer massage by hands, or want to try two tennis balls in a sock or a paint roller.

You may like massage of your hands, feet, back or tummy, with very light stroking (effleurage) or a firmer touch. Let your partner know what works best for you.

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**Pressure/Counterpressure**

Some women experience intense pressure in the lower back (back labour) or when pushing.

**Counterpressure** is a type of massage that helps relieve this pressure or backache. Your partner/support person presses thumbs, heel of the hand or fist against your lower back during a contraction. Tell your support person what feels best.

**Double hip squeeze** is another type of counterpressure that usually works best in a hands and knees position. Your partner places a hand on each of your hip bones, points thumbs toward your spine and pushes in and up towards the centre of your body.

**Knee Press** You sit upright in a chair; your partner kneels on the floor in front, places one hand on each of your knees, leans toward you and presses your knees straight back toward your hip joints.
**Breathing and Relaxation**

A common reaction to pain or stress is to breathe shallowly and quickly, and/or to breath-hold and tense up. Breathing techniques during labour will help you bring enough oxygen to both you and your baby and also reduce muscle tension. Before labour, practise breathing and relaxation techniques with your partner/support person. During labour, use the breathing pattern that feels most comfortable and is working for you.

**Slow Breathing**
- Breathe in slowly and deeply.
- With each slow breath out, relax your shoulders, hands and face.

**Light, Quick Breathing**
- Breathe in slowly and deeply at the beginning of each contraction. Continue with slow breathing in and out.
- As a contraction becomes more intense, use light, quick, rhythmical breathing in and out.
- End with another slow deep breath as each contraction eases.
- Smile and tell yourself you are doing it one contraction at a time!

**Pant-Pant-Blow**
Pant-pant-blow is an alternate breathing pattern if you have an overwhelming urge to push but your cervix is not quite fully dilated:
- Take a deep breath in.
- Exhale in 2 short pants and a longer breath out (blow).
- Repeat until the contraction eases.

**Attention Focusing or Visualization**

There is a strong connection between the physical and the psychological aspects of labour and birth. Focusing your attention on positive thoughts can help your body relax and let your uterus do the work of giving birth to your baby.
- External focal point – Focus on a favourite photograph or object, or look into the eyes of your support person.
- Internal focal point – Choose a relaxing memory or favourite piece of music that makes you feel good. Focus on it with eyes closed during your contractions.

Visualizations with instructions and music are helpful for practising this technique during pregnancy. They may be found as downloadable mp3s, on CDs in the library (free) and in stores.

**Vocalization**

Rhythmic, low moaning may help you through your contractions. You might also try repeating a phrase such as “I am strong” or “I can do this for my baby”.

**Other Comfort Measures**

Your partner/support person can help position your pillows, bring you a blanket or socks if your feet are cold, adjust the lights, play the music you like and help you rest between contractions.

**Fluids**

Stay hydrated during labour by drinking water, juice or sucking on popsicles between contractions. Lack of fluids can affect your energy and make labour more difficult.

**Pleasant Tastes**

Breathing patterns may make your mouth feel dry. Ice chips, lollipops, popsicles, flavoured lip balm or brushing your teeth between contractions will help.

**Aromatherapy**

You may find certain smells such as lavender to be soothing. Check in advance if your hospital has a scent-free policy as some scents trigger reactions in people who are sensitive.

**Empty Bladder**

It is important to empty your bladder frequently to reduce this extra pressure in your abdomen. When labour is intense, you may need your partner/support person to remind you to go to the bathroom between contractions.

**Emotional Support**

Your partner/support person provides the very important comfort measure called encouragement - telling you often that you are doing a great job, being flexible when you change your mind about what to do next and understanding if, at times, you lose your focus. Women who feel well-supported during labour often have shorter labours with fewer medical interventions and complications.

Your support person will also be part of a memory that will last a lifetime.