

Quick Facts About Continuous Labor Support

What is labor support?

Labor is an intense physical and emotional experience. It's comforting to be reassured that what's happening is normal and healthy and to get feedback about your progress in labor. Some women also want comforting touch or gentle assistance moving and changing positions in labor. You may also appreciate encouragement and help communicating your wishes to your clinical caregivers. Anyone who offers this kind of help and comfort is providing labor support. Labor support is not clinical care, which is provided by health professionals such as nurses, midwives, and physicians.

Why is support in labor important to consider?

Every woman hopes for her birth experience to be as positive as possible. But women may feel that asking for support and kind treatment in labor shows they are less concerned about safety than a mother should be. In fact, planning for excellent support in labor is an effective way to make birth safer and healthier for you and your baby.

Research shows that the availability of support in labor can affect your chances of having a cesarean, vacuum extraction, or forceps delivery; the likelihood that you will need pain medications; and your baby's condition at birth. Labor support can help you avoid or reduce risks associated with these interventions. Research also shows that having good support can affect how you feel about your birth, and that memories of childbirth experiences often stay with women throughout their lives.

Who can give me support during labor and birth?

You may want to have one or more of the following people on hand to aid you throughout labor and birth:

- **trained labor support specialist:** The most common name for such a person is doula (pronounced DOO-lah), a Greek word meaning "woman who serves." This type of labor support companion has the strongest impact on your health and safety during labor and birth. Compared with women who have no support in labor, women who have support from a companion who is neither a member of the hospital staff nor a friend or family member are:
 - 28% less likely to have a cesarean section
 - 31% less likely to use synthetic oxytocin to speed labor
 - 9% less likely to use any pain medication
 - 34% less like to rate their childbirth experience negatively.
- **your partner:** Many partners feel some concern about supporting a woman during labor. In the end, most find that providing help and comfort in labor is very rewarding, and that being present at the birth of their child is one of life's peak experiences.
- **clinical caregiver:** In most cases, this would be a nurse, midwife, or doctor. Research suggests that labor support from clinical caregivers does not alter the

likelihood of having a cesarean section or a “spontaneous” birth (with neither cesarean nor vacuum extraction nor forceps). Research also suggests that continuous support from hospital personnel does not impact a woman’s satisfaction with her childbirth experience. Hospital-based practitioners and staff may have difficulty providing optimal labor support for several reasons, including their background and education that does not emphasize labor support skills; responsibility to other laboring women; and tasks like paperwork and procedures that take their attention away from offering support.

- **invited relative or friend:** You can choose someone in your social network with whom you (and your partner, if you have one) feel comfortable sharing this important and intimate time. She should be a warm, relaxed, and calm person who views labor and birth as healthy, normal events in a woman’s life.

In comparison with not having continuous labor support, rigorous research suggests that having such support throughout labor from a person in a woman’s social network (such as her husband, partner, sister, or friend) increases her chances of being satisfied with her childbirth experience, but does not appear to impact her chances of having a cesarean section or other obstetric procedures.

If you have a husband or partner who plans to be with you when you are giving birth, you both may welcome having a doula on your team. She can look after your partner as well as you, acting as a resource and guide, making sure your partner’s needs are met, and helping your partner support you. Some couples wonder if having a doula will disturb the privacy and intimacy of labor and birth; a doula can help to protect privacy and create an intimate atmosphere in a busy institutional setting.

Where can I learn more?

This information is adapted from Childbirth Connection’s in-depth online section for women on labor support at childbirthconnection.org/laborsupport/. The section includes a table comparing pros and cons of various types of labor support companions, pictures and videos of labor support; additional information about finding and selecting labor support companions; and an overview of the most rigorous and current research about the effects of labor support on women and infants. The section also considers financial concerns and provides a list of questions to ask when speaking with a doula who might help you when you give birth. Finally, it can point you to resources to help your husband or partner, family member, or friend prepare to provide support for you around the time of birth.

The main source for the information in this fact sheet is:
Hodnett ED, Gates S, Hofmeyr GJ, Sakala C, Weston J. Continuous support for women during childbirth. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2011, Issue 2. Art. No.: CD003766. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD003766.pub3.

The full text of this systematic review and a summary of the review are available at childbirthconnection.org/laborsupportreview/