



Your important health information

Breathing in Labour

Breathing in a controlled or paced manner gives women a focus for concentrating and the ability to work with their contractions. This will assist in coping with labour.

- **Controlled** or **paced** breathing means breathing to a level of comfort. Breaths should not be over exaggerated or too rapid. Breathing should feel comfortable and labouring women should not feel stressed or anxious that they may not be “doing it the right way”.
- Some may find that breathing to a particular rhythm or beat helps them to keep breathing when they might otherwise be tempted to tense-up and hold their breath. Background music may help with this. Others may rely on a partner or support person giving prompts to remind the labouring mum to continue breathing.
- It may seem obvious to keep breathing throughout a contraction but it is tempting when contractions are increasing in frequency, duration and intensity to panic or lose focus or take in a deep breath, hold it and not breathe again until the contraction subsides.
- If you do not breathe through your contractions the following may occur. Oxygen levels start to drop, carbon dioxide levels begin to rise and lactic acid rises resulting in pain being felt more intensely.

Controlled or paced breathing:

- Increases relaxation
- Decreases pain perception

By mindfully controlling the breathing rate during contractions:

- Heart rate can be reduced
 - Blood pressure can be reduced
 - Pain perception can be reduced.
- As contractions increase in strength, duration and frequency the breathing rate will increase but should remain controlled.
 - During labour women who focus on controlling their breathing to a comfortable rate will find their breathing rate will automatically increase as their contractions increase.
 - Partners/support people will notice this and may need to change the rhythm or prompts to keep within the breathing pattern that best suits the mum in labour.
 - Partners/support people may need to encourage women to slow their rate of breathing if it remains rapid after the peak of the contraction or mum feels dizzy.

Nose or mouth breathing?

- Either or both, whatever women are comfortable with.
- Breathing in deeply through the nose and then slowing out through the mouth, as if cooling a hot drink, can be very relaxing so try practicing this at home so it's easy to do in labour.
- If women only mouth breathe they will have a very dry mouth.
- Liquids, lollies, lip balm and ice will be useful.
- Breaths should feel comfortable and can be 'reset' by taking a few deep slow breaths.

Encourage rest between contractions

- One way of helping mothers relax between contractions is with a "sigh".
- A deep breath slowly inhaled to comfortably fill the lungs and then slowly exhaled through the mouth. This may be audible or silent. A big "sigh" after a workload encourages relaxation, assume a more relaxed posture and move away from the stress and tension that was experienced.

Breathing Check

- Is she breathing or holding her breath?
- Is breathing at a controlled rate?
- Does she look relaxed?
- Are her muscles tense?
- Is her jaw tight?
- Where are her shoulders sitting? Up near her ears, or relaxed?
- Are her arms flexed or floppy?
- Are her hands clenched or soft?

Partners/support people can be actively involved in assisting women find ways to relax between contractions with position changes, massage, words of encouragement, heat packs, cool cloths, sips of fluid, trips to the toilet.

Controlled breathing can be used in conjunction with these and other tools to provide comfort, support and pain relief for women in labour.

Further Information

If you have any questions regarding this information, please contact

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