



Pain relief in Labour

For many pregnant women, labour equals pain. There is no doubt that pain is a major component of the birth process; few labours are painless. Pain in labour is complex and personal and women will react in different ways depending on many factors. However the important thing to remember is that pain in labour is a **natural and normal process**.

Attendance at antenatal classes alleviates the fear of the unknown. In general, antenatal classes are designed to impart information to mothers-to-be and their partners. All the options for pain relief in childbirth are explained and women can then make up their own minds, based on the knowledge they have acquired.

This is done through a combination of theory and practical physical exercises, and the atmosphere is usually one of relaxation, enjoyment and good humour. Partners are invited to attend all antenatal classes, and the majority of them do. A DVD can be obtained which provides a virtual tour of the hospital and the services it provides, this can be watched in the comfort of your own home with your partner and provides invaluable visual insight to the hospital.

Most women will have experienced varying degrees of pain in their lives and will have some idea of their particular pain threshold. However, the pain of labour is quite unlike any other in that it does not signal that something is wrong. It is caused by uterine contractions, the dilatation of the cervix and, in the late first stage and second stage, by stretching of the vagina and pelvic floor to accommodate the baby

It is important to find out which methods of pain relief are available to you and to think about which option(s) you may prefer. Consider the benefits and possible side effects of each method carefully and discuss your decision with your GP/obstetrician/midwife. If you are hoping for a natural birth, it is important too that you find out whether or not you have to practice certain techniques or organise

any equipment before you go into labour. While it is important to be informed and organised about what kind of labour you want, remember that labour does not always go according to plan so it is also vital to keep an open mind.

<u>NATURAL METHODS</u>	<u>PHARMACOLOGICAL METHODS</u>
Movement	Entonox(gas and air)
Relaxation techniques	Pethidine
Massage	Epidural
Water	
TENS	
Music	

NATURAL METHODS OF PAIN RELIEF

Natural (non-pharmacological) methods of pain relief soothe and relax you but will not entirely stop all pain. Nevertheless, by easing tension they increase your capacity to deal with pain. Some of these techniques will need to be practiced beforehand.

MOVEMENT

Remaining mobile, especially during the early stages of labour, can help reduce backache as well as acting as a distraction to the pain. Try different positions in labour using cushions, bean bags or a 'birthing ball' for support until you find a position that suits you best.



What is a birthing ball?

A birthing ball is a large anti burst, non slip inflatable ball filled with air.

What do I do with it?

The ball should be inflated either with compressed air from a garage or a foot or hand pump. As you sit on the ball keep your legs open with your feet firmly on the floor. **Your hips should be higher than your knees.**

Essentially the ball provides support. When sitting astride the ball there is no muscle tension because the thighs and the perineum are gently supported by the gentle counter pressure from the ball. The feet should be firmly grounded, and the spine will naturally adopt a position of good alignment.

Why should I use a birth ball?

Listed here are a few of the benefits achieved by using a birth ball:

- § Sitting on the ball at a desk or table raises your hips higher than your knees. This encourages your baby to settle into an optimal position for birth.
- § The softness of the ball absorbs your weight and helps to prevent and relieve back strain
- § Kneeling over the ball takes the weight off your back and is great practice for labour
- § Sitting on the ball is ideal for practising your pelvic floor exercises
- § Rolling with the ball encourages rhythmic movement and pelvic mobility

- § Natural movements with the ball help to gently tone your internal and external pelvic muscles.
- § You could use it daily for massage and relaxation
- § Contractions tend to be less painful than if you were lying down.
- § You are literally 'on top' of the pain. This can improve your ability to cope dramatically.
- § It will allow you to move freely, change positions and go with the flow of contractions.
- § The ball provides you with perfect support in upright labour and birth positions
- § The rhythmic circular movements dissipate the pain and give you something to focus on.
- § Sitting on the ball and swaying your hips can encourage the baby through the pelvis and into the birth canal.

WATER

The use of water for relaxation and pain relief in labour has grown in popularity over the last few years. Water supports the body and relaxing in a bath or birthing pool may offer a welcome relief from the fatigue of carrying your baby at term.

It is important that you follow the advice of your midwife or doctor.



RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

Learning to relax both physically and mentally will help to alleviate anxiety and tension. If your mind and body is relaxed you may be able to work with your contractions rather than against them during labour, which may help reduce pain.

Concentrating on your breathing may also help to relieve anxiety and subsequently pain during contractions. Various breathing techniques for the different stages of labour are taught at antenatal classes. You should practice them regularly during the last trimester of your pregnancy.

MASSAGE

Massage increases heat to the underlying tissue and is thought to increase the use of endorphins, which are your body's naturally produced painkillers. Massage can be done by your partner, birth partner. During the early stages of labour you may find general massage of the back and shoulders calming. Later, specific techniques such as light circular stroking of the abdomen or pressure applied to the sacral area during a contraction may be useful.



MUSIC

Music therapy encourages women to cope with labour and delivery without drugs, helps them to breathe properly and focus their attention. Using music for some women make them less anxious during labour. Even if you do end up having an epidural, music can relax women during the procedure and keep them calm for the following stages of labour. All women are welcome to bring in their own music, perhaps music they listened to while their babies were in-utero.

TENS (Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation)

TENS machine is a machine consisting of four pads with electrodes connected by wires to a battery operated pulsar.

The pads are stuck onto your back (2 below your bra line and 2 above the panty line). Using a hand held control; you give yourself weak electric currents which then travel through to the points where you have the electrodes.



TENS machines are specially designed to combat pain during childbirth. The stimulation from a TENS machine, which feels like 'pins and needles', affects the way pain signals are sent to the brain. Pain signals reach the brain via sensory nerves and the spinal cord. If pain signals can be blocked then the brain will receive fewer signals from the source of the pain. Just like a gate not letting anything pass. They also stimulate your body to produce higher levels of its own natural pain killers called 'endorphins'.

When do I Start Using TENS?

TENS is most effective when it is used in early labour at home. The longer the delay the less effective the stimulator becomes. This allows for an early build up of endorphins.

How does TENS work?

TENS machines are thought to work in two ways.

- When the machine is set on a high pulse rate it triggers the 'pain gate' to close. This is thought to block a pain nerve pathway to the brain. This is the normal method of use.
- When the machine is set on a low pulse rate it stimulates the body to make its own pain easing chemicals called endorphins. These act a bit like morphine to block pain signals.

Benefits of TENS machines are that they are:

- Totally safe and drug free
- You are in control
- You can continue to be mobile while using it
- It allows you to use other drugs such as pethidine or gas and air
- It is every effective if used from the onset of labour. Once the correct strength of the current has been set, the effects can be felt immediately.
- No side effects in the baby
- No side effects in you

Hospital does not provide a TENS machine.

You can hire a TENS machine.

If you are planning to use TENS for pain relief during labour, it is recommend that you book your machine at least a month before your due date. You can of course purchase a TENS machine.

Safety issues

- Only use TENS from 37 weeks of pregnancy. Earlier use should be discussed with your obstetrician.
- Electrodes should not be placed on the abdomen at any time during pregnancy or labour.
- Do not use TENS when driving, cycling or operating machinery.
- If you have a pacemaker, epilepsy, have or are suspected of having heart disease, seek medical advice.
- TENS can not be used in the shower or birthing pool.

PHARMACOLOGICAL METHODS OF PAIN RELIEF

The three main pharmacological methods of pain relief in labour are Entonox (gas and air), Pethidine (or other opiate drug) and epidural analgesia.

ENTONOX

Entonox also known as gas and air or 'laughing gas', is commonly used for pain relief during childbirth. It is a mixture of oxygen and a gas called nitrous oxide that you inhale through a mouthpiece or a face mask (the preference should be yours).

Research shows that women find it useful but it may not be very effective in actually lessening the pain.

The advantages of Entonox:

- You decide when to use Entonox, so you feel more in control.
- It works in 30-40 seconds but has no lasting effect.
- It apparently has no unpleasant side effects on your baby.

- It doesn't stop you wanting to push
- You can use it right up to the moment of giving birth.

The disadvantages of Entonox:

- You may need a bit of practice with the mouthpiece and timing with your contractions, before you feel the full effects.
- It can make you feel sick, dizzy or light-headed
- It may limit how much you can walk about.

PETHIDINE

Pethidine is a widely used drug for pain relief in labour. Pethidine is a similar drug to morphine. This drug is from a family of drugs known as opioids. Opioids basically are morphine-like drugs.

Pethidine is usually given by an injection into the muscle of your leg or buttock. It takes about 20 minutes to work and is effective for around 3 hours.

Pethidine helps you to relax and may lessen the pain of your contractions, but it does not work for everyone, and it often causes side effects. Vomiting is common after having pethidine, so an anti sickness drug is usually given with it. Other side effects include; feeling shaky, light headed and disorientated. The more of the drug you have, the more likely you are to suffer these effects.

Pethidine very quickly crosses the placenta and reaches the baby. If you have an injection of pethidine 2 to 4 hours before you deliver, your baby's breathing may be affected and occasionally an antidote needs to be given.

Most babies are fine, but they do tend to be a little sleepier in the first few days and take longer to establish feeding.

Will pethidine provide me with adequate pain relief while I am in labour?

This is not an easy question to answer as women report varying responses to pethidine. Some women say that it provides adequate relief while other women say they achieved no pain relief whatsoever (48% of women in one survey said this). Women report pethidine provides greater relief in early labour rather than in later labour (when the contractions are a lot stronger).

Overall pethidine may reduce pain experienced during labour in some women. If a woman is tired, pethidine can provide sedation (and sometimes much needed sleep). Pethidine can act as a muscle relaxant which can in some cases result in faster dilation (opening) of the cervix.

EPIDURAL