

## THE BIG DAY!

When the big day comes you will have learnt lots of things that can help you, for example you might like to have a bath or shower which can really help you to relax. Early labour will probably feel a bit like period “cramps” and bathing or a hot water bottle may well help as can taking a couple of paracetamol if you wish.

Moving around and adopting different positions is also another useful thing to do – you might find that walking, marching or crawling around on all-fours might help. It is fine to go out for a walk in early labour if you feel up to it, and it is a good idea to find something constructive to do – perhaps watching a film. If you possibly can you should also try to have a nap – you will probably be working very hard for the next 24 hours, another tip is to have something light to eat and drink plenty as you will need the energy later!

TENS which is a small, battery operated machine can help; the idea is that you put the electrodes (or sticky pads) into four specific places on your back and the machine sends an electric impulse to the pads which are placed over nerve endings. TENS works in several ways, it boosts the body’s endorphin production (endorphins are our natural pain killers), it also blocks pain messages to your brain and lastly it is a distraction! Many women find TENS helpful – the trick is to put in on fairly early in your labour - TENS machines can be hired fairly inexpensively from some supermarkets, pharmacies and even some hospitals.

Soft lighting, music and massage can be relaxing – especially massage to the lower back as many women experience backache in labour. Either using hands, a nice oil or even rolling a tennis ball around on your lower back will probably feel really helpful. This might be something that you can practice with a birth partner prior to labour.

Most women find that staying active, listening to what their body tells them, is helpful. If your body is telling you to rest, then rest, if you feel better pacing around then pace. Having a supportive birth partner ( or partners) is also invaluable - having a woman who has successfully given birth before is really helpful and can allow your partner time to eat, rest or even pop to the toilet!

Speaking of toilet - remember to pass urine frequently yourself, ask your partner to remind you to wee every couple of hours at least as a full bladder can hamper descent of the baby's head.

During the labour, use any breathing/relaxation techniques you have learnt, sit on a birthing ball, practice hypnotherapy, use your TENS machine, be active, sing, chant, make a noise, use massage, visualise your baby, your cervix opening - ask your partner to encourage you and to look deep into your eyes and breathe with you or use any complementary therapies that you have prepared (homoeopathy, oils, acupuncture etc).

I would encourage you to consider not using the birthing pool until the "going gets tough" and then you have somewhere else to go, somewhere that may be blissfully relaxing.

So you can see there really is quite a lot that you can do to help yourself in labour!

If you have tried all these techniques but still need more help there are drugs that the midwife can give you, for example entonox (known as gas and air) – this is not thought to harm either mother or baby and if you don't like it you can just stop using it at any time. Most women think entonox is really helpful – it is just a mixture of oxygen and nitrous oxide which you breathe in through a mask or mouth-piece. It can occasionally make women nauseous and may make you feel a bit drunk!

The next level of pain relief available is an injection (usually given into your leg or bottom); the type of drug varies in different areas, but is usually meptid, pethidine or diamorphine. These drugs can make you feel drunk and a bit "spaced out" – some women really find them helpful, but other women don't like them – I guess if you are needing help at this stage the answer is to try them and see what you think. The disadvantages are that they can make you sick (they are usually given with an anti-sickness drug for this reason) and may make you feel "out of control" and the effects of the drug will last for some time. The baby will also get a dose of the drug and this may make the baby sleepy at birth and make feeding slightly harder to establish.

If you require something stronger an epidural may be the answer, this is when a local anaesthetic is injected into your back. The advantages are that this usually offers good pain relief, especially when labour is long – you can usually sleep and rest once you have an epidural. However there are also disadvantages in that you have to stay very still whilst the epidural is sited and you will need a drip and probably a catheter to help you to pass urine. Your movement will be restricted and your baby will need to be continually monitored as very occasionally the baby can become distressed. Other disadvantages are that the epidural may not be 100% effective, some women experience "break-through" pain and occasionally further complications, also because there is a lack of sensation to "push" the baby out you might be more likely to need additional help with the birth.

In summary, you can see that there are lots of things you can do to help yourself during the labour, but if you need additional help there are drugs on offer to help you.

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