

## Care Practices That Promote Normal Birth

### #3: Continuous Labor Support

*A partner in a Lamaze class says, "How on earth can I provide the support she needs during labor? Will I have any help?"*

Until recent times, women learned about childbirth from their mothers and sisters. Birth took place in the familiar comfort of home. Family rituals and traditions ensured that women were confident in their ability to give birth, surrounded by family members and wise women who provided support and encouragement throughout labor and birth. Community midwives attended almost all births.

As birth moved into the hospital early in the 20th century, women lost the valuable support and encouragement of women from their communities. Nurses provided support, but they were often responsible for several laboring women and could not remain continuously at the bedside of only one woman.

During the 1960s, Lamaze International and other childbirth organizations lobbied successfully to allow fathers into the labor room. Fathers provide special emotional support to laboring women. Now, in the 21st century, women are once again discovering the value of additional support provided by women knowledgeable about birth.

Women often assume that a nurse, midwife, or doctor will be with them continuously throughout their labor. In some birth settings, midwives and nurses *are* able to provide continuous support to the laboring woman and her family. However, in many birth settings, the reality is that other responsibilities often keep midwives and nurses from being with one woman continuously. Even when a midwife is caring for only one laboring woman,

it can be helpful for an additional experienced woman to provide emotional and physical support.

Before your baby's birth, you should decide who could offer continuous support for you. You might choose a friend or relative, or perhaps you will decide to hire a *doula*, a professional labor support person.

#### **Why Continuous Support Is Important**

Labor may surprise you (and your partner) with its power. Having a woman experienced with birth continuously present to reassure you and your partner that labor is progressing normally will help you both to cope. A woman experienced with childbirth will also know how to provide comforting touch and suggest positions that will aid the progress and comfort of your labor. You may have friends or relatives who have experience with childbirth and who are willing to provide this kind of continuous support. If you do not, you might consider hiring a doula.

#### **The Role of a Doula**

According to *The Doula Book*, a doula is "an experienced labor companion who provides the woman and her husband or partner both emotional and physical support throughout the entire labor and delivery, and to some extent, afterward."<sup>1</sup>

A doula will remain with you and your partner continuously throughout labor and birth, providing physical, emotional, and informational support. Your doula will never be away



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from you for more than a few minutes unless you request time alone with your partner. A doula will work with you and your partner to help you have the type of birth you want. She may help you into a warm tub or shower, walk with you and your partner, and massage your back, hands, or feet. A doula will support you in your decision regarding pain medication. If you tell your doula that you want to have an unmedicated birth, she will help you accomplish this goal. After the birth, a doula usually stays with you for 1 to 2 hours to help you with breastfeeding.

Doulas are not trained to perform any medical or nursing tasks and should never offer medical advice. However, they can help you understand medical events. They also can encourage you to communicate your preferences to the hospital staff. If your labor takes a different path than expected, a doula can help you clarify your feelings and review your options.

One of the most important roles of the doula is to help you to have positive memories of your birth experience. After the birth, you will remember together the positive aspects of the birth, and she will answer any questions you may have. If the birth does not go as you planned, your doula will be there to listen and to provide support.

### **Research Regarding Continuous Support**

The research regarding the benefits of continuous support by doulas during labor is impressive. According to the Cochrane Pregnancy and Childbirth Group, a respected worldwide source of information regarding evidence-based care, studies demonstrate that continuous support for women during labor and childbirth is clearly beneficial. Compared to women who receive usual care during labor, women with continuous, one-to-one support are less likely to

- have a cesarean birth,
- give birth with vacuum or forceps,
- have regional analgesia (e.g., an epidural),
- have any analgesia (pain medication), and
- report dissatisfaction with or negatively rate their childbirth experience.

The Cochrane authors also found that results were better when support was provided by outsiders (with or without special training) who were present expressly for the purpose of offering support, than when support was provided by regular hospital personnel such as nurses, midwives, and midwife students. The reviewers commented that features of modern hospital environments, as currently organized, make it challenging for hospital staff to provide continuous labor support.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Doula and the Labor Partner**

Most partners want to participate in the birth of their children and to provide support for their significant others. However, most men and some women have little if any experience with childbirth. As contractions build in intensity and the laboring woman struggles with pain, a partner may become frightened. He or she may not have the experience to know that labor is proceeding exactly as it should. It becomes increasingly difficult for a partner to reassure the laboring woman. Most partners breathe a huge sigh of relief when an experienced woman is present and can provide reassurance that labor is going just fine.

A good doula takes her cues from the labor partner. If your partner is sitting close to you, holding your hand, and providing eye-to-eye contact and supportive words, the doula will not interfere in the intimate relationship between the two of you. Instead, she provides invaluable support and encouragement to both you and your partner.

However, if you need additional support, the doula will work along with your partner by providing a back or foot massage while your partner provides the eye-to-eye contact and reassuring words. Or the doula may suggest a change of activity such as a warm bath or shower or a walk in the halls. The doula can show your partner how to provide effective counterpressure or massage. The doula can also provide support while your partner takes a much-needed bathroom or meal break.



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### **Planning for Continuous Support**

A friend or relative experienced with childbirth may be willing to provide continuous support to you and your partner. These women do not need to have formal training as doulas, as long as they have confidence in your

ability to birth your baby and are willing to stay with you continuously during labor.

However, many women today find that hiring a doula is the best way to ensure that they have continuous emotional and physical support throughout labor and birth. You can request referrals from your childbirth educator, your healthcare provider, or Doulas of North America (<http://www.dona.org>). Once you have chosen a doula, you will schedule at least one prenatal visit with her to discuss the type of birth that you and your partner hope to have. Comfort measures that are important to you, including medications, should be shared with the doula.



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Some hospitals or birth centers may offer doula services to all or some of their clients. If there is a language barrier between a laboring woman and the doula, both usually find that eye-to-eye contact and gentle touch overcome the lack of a common language.

Some health plans will reimburse you for the cost of doula services. You can call in advance to see if services are reimbursable, and advocate for doula coverage if they are not. Insurance companies and health plans may not know that, by providing continuous support, doulas decrease health care costs associated with interventions such as cesarean births.

### Recommendations from Lamaze International

Lamaze International joins with the World Health Organization<sup>3</sup> in recognizing the value of continuous labor support as a key element in normal birth. Lamaze believes that all women should have access to continuous labor support, without financial or cultural barriers. Lamaze encourages all women to plan for a supportive birthing environment that includes continuous emotional, physical, and informational support.

A supportive woman experienced with childbirth can make a unique contribution to your care during labor and birth because of her commitment to remaining with you and your family continuously, her knowledge of both physical and emotional comfort measures, and her confidence in your innate ability to birth your baby.

### References

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