

Fact Sheet

The role of the support person

womensnewbornhealth.com.au

What is the role of the support person?

The birth of a baby creates lifelong memories and being asked to attend the labour and birth as a support person is a great honour. Your role is a special one and you have the ability to promote a positive birth experience. Research has shown that having the right support people can reduce the need for pain relief, assisted vaginal births and caesarean sections.

As a support person you need to be respectful of the birthing experience, be supportive and offer emotional help and guidance. We recommend you learn about labour, as your knowledge can help the labouring woman feel confident and well supported. The emotional side of labour can be challenging for labouring women and your ability to remain calm and positive is very reassuring to women and can make her feel safe.

Who can be support people?

A support person can be a partner, sister, mother, aunty, best-friend or a doula. A doula is a person who provides non-medical support to the birthing woman and is knowledgeable about labour and birth. Most importantly, a support person has an attitude which is positive and promotes the birthing woman's ability to labour and give birth.

What can support people do during labour and birth?

In early labour and while still at home we recommend you encourage the labouring woman to rest so as to save energy.

- You can prepare light snacks and drinks of water
- Take a walk with the labouring woman.
- Every now and again, you can time contractions but remember to focus on the labouring woman not the clock.

Early labour is often called pre-labour or latent phase of labour. Early labour is different to active labour, as the cervix begins to change very gradually. It is important to understand that early labour may take many hours and rushing this time creates fear and impatience for labouring women.



When you remain calm and focus on helping the labouring woman to relax, hydrate (drink) and eat healthy foods, the birthing woman's body is more likely to enter a more rhythmic (regular) pattern of labour.

Active Labour is when contractions are regular and the cervix dilates beyond 4cm. In active labour a support person's role includes:

- Encourage the labouring woman to change into different positions. Gravity helps babies move down and out of the pelvis
- Suggest positions such as standing, walking, squatting, kneeling and forward leaning
- Encourage natural forms of pain relief including walking, stair climbing, pelvic rocking, heat and massage.
- Choose positive words of comfort eg. "You are so clever, your body and baby is working well. You are strong." Have eye contact with the birthing woman
- Remind the birthing woman to relax, and breathe gently through contractions
- Massage back, neck, abdomen and other parts of the woman's labouring body
- Provide emotional encouragement
- Provide comfort techniques such as heat packs and massage
- Help with nourishment including drinks and food as instructed by your midwives or doctors.

During birth

- Hold a cool cloth to the woman's forehead between pushes.
- Stay engaged in the birth process.
- Be calm and supportive. Offer words of positive encouragement, for example "That's so good, you are going so well, soon we will meet your baby".

womensnewbornhealth.com.au

After the birth

The time after the baby is born is a very special time. As you welcome babies into the world for the first time, it is important to remember to allow mothers and fathers time to get to know their baby. The birthing family may wish you to quietly capture some photos. Remember to be respectful and provide words of encouragement. Many support people share in the celebrations of the baby's birthday. When the time is appropriate, the support person is able to help the woman with showering and dressing ready to either return home or go to the maternity ward.

Tips for the support person

by Professor Hannah Dahlen.

- Be interested, by finding out what is important to the woman and by being aware of her birth plan, if she has one. Come along to some preparation for parenting classes, read books and watch a birth video. Remember, you need to be on call for several weeks before and sometimes after the due date.
- Be a comforter, by massaging backs, renewing hot packs, getting ice for her to chew on, wiping brows (sometimes noses) and assisting her into different birth positions. Always check with the midwife first.
- Be a communicator, by taking phone calls and passing messages on to inquiring friends and family, so her partner doesn't have to leave. Check beforehand who is allowed to know what, at which time!
- Be a supporter, by not taking over from the partner, but by supporting them to support the woman. Don't be loud and crack lots of jokes. She does not need cheering up; she needs cheering on (quietly). This is not a party, it's a labour so be quiet and calm and don't intrude too much. Don't talk during contractions and don't

talk about the woman or over the woman as if she is not there. After the birth, leave the couple together so they can spend some intimate moments alone.

- Be an advocate if there is conflict between the woman, her partner and her caregiver – but try to stay calm and appeal to reason. Refer to the birth plan if needed, but also recognise not all births go to plan. Remember, at all times this is her birth not yours so follow her lead and what you know she would want. Leave your own baggage at the door!
- Be a trusted friend and remember the woman you are supporting may become uninhibited and even aggressive. If she swears like a drunken sailor, remember it's normal in labour. Don't humiliate her by telling stories to others about how she acted in labour. It's her birth and her birth story.

We welcome further feedback on this brochure as a way of continually improving our service.

Send your feedback to:

WSLHD-Get_Involved@health.nsw.gov.au