

Fact Sheet

Active Birth

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What is active birth and why is it important?

Active birth is when you choose to move your body and adopt different positions in order to help manage your contractions and improve your progress in labour.

It is important because studies have shown that keeping active and upright helps your labour to progress and lessens the length of time it takes to push your baby out

Early Labour

Most of the time you will be at home for the early stages of labour unless your birth is being medically induced in hospital. Whilst at home it is important you remember to conserve your energy for labour and birth.

Early labour can stop and start and last several days, it is easy to become sleep deprived when this happens. Sleep when you can and don't do anything too strenuous. It is helpful to go for walks in early labour and even before contractions start.

Many women report labour commencing after they have been walking.

If you need to talk to someone or have concerns about what is happening at this stage you can contact Birth Unit for advice.

Some of the things you may wish to call about are:

- you think your waters have broken
- you've had some vaginal loss and are not sure what it is
- you think it is taking a long time for the labour to get going properly
- the way your baby is moving
- you need some advice on managing your contractions

The midwife you speak to may advise you are OK to stay a little longer at home or she or he may ask you to attend the Birth Unit. You will decide this together based on what you have talked about.



Established Labour

Ideally you will go into established labour at home. This usually happens when your contractions have been coming regularly, are a few minutes apart and last around 40 - 60 seconds for a few hours.

These contractions help to thin out and open up the neck of the womb, or cervix. When the cervix opens up to around 4cm and your contractions are still coming every few minutes this is called established labour.

Some women take longer than others to reach this stage. If this is your second or third baby it can also happen quite quickly.

Many women may want to lie on the bed at this point in time because they feel tired. Although it may be tempting to rest on the bed when you are in labour, it can slow down your progress and delay the birth of your baby.

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This is the most important time to move your body, change positions and use the different active birth techniques suggested.

Being active can be very helpful for you as experiencing contractions can be quite intense.

Benefits of active birth

- being in an upright position can shorten the first stage of labour by up to an hour
- being upright in labour means there is better blood flow to your baby. Lying down on your back compresses your large blood vessels, this can lower your blood pressure and decrease the blood and oxygen supply to the placenta and therefore the baby
- women using upright positions for labour are less likely to ask for or need an epidural
- our bodies were designed to birth in an upright position. The bottom of the spine (the sacrum) is curved and the tailbone (the coccyx) is hinged and is free to open to allow more room for birth
- gravity works with the curve of the pelvis and helps the baby be born
- your partner can be more involved by supporting you in adopting different positions. You work as a team together, this helps you both to bond with the baby afterwards
- women who labour and birth in upright positions report that they have a more satisfying birth experience overall.

You are less likely to need an intervention in labour such as:

- having your waters broken in the first stage, this is called an ARM (Artificial Rupture of Membranes)
- a vacuum cup or forceps to help birth your baby in the second stage



How can I be active during labour?

Gravity helps your baby to move through the birth canal, so remember, an upright position is helpful.

Some women like to have a shower in labour. The warm water can also assist with managing your contraction.

Westmead Birth Unit has exercise balls that you can sit on and gently move your body. Try rocking your hips from side to side – this will encourage baby to move through your pelvis and find the right position for birth.

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Focusing on the movement of your body can also act as a distraction from the contractions. Playing music you like can help with this, some women even like to dance their way through their contractions! If you choose to have an epidural in labour it is important to realise that you will remain on the bed until after baby is born.



Do I lie on the bed when it comes to the pushing stage?

When it is time for you to start pushing it is ok to remain in an upright position. Your midwife will assist with the appropriate position for pushing, but you don't have to push whilst lying on the bed.

Pushing on the bed may actually slow the contractions and delay the birth. Again gravity can help you during the pushing stage.

You may choose to push

- on all-fours
- standing
- sitting on a birth stool
- in the bath

You have to find the position that suits you best, talking to your midwife will help you decide this, it may be she or he has other things you can try.

Occasionally some of these positions may not work for you or your baby, your midwife will guide you. It is a good idea to share what you now know about active birth with the support people you have chosen to help care for you in labour. This means they can encourage you to use active birth techniques and you can feel supported.

Active birth isn't about rules, it's about doing what feels right at the time. You should move into positions that feel comfortable and try to stay active throughout labour and birth.

But the most important aspect is that you are comfortable and relaxed.

Being active and in control of your labour can be a life changing and empowering event for a woman. Nature has prepared you with every tool you will need to birth your baby.

Trust and have confidence in your abilities and you will be rewarded.

“All natural birth has a purpose and a plan; who would think of tearing open the chrysalis as the butterfly is emerging? Who would break the shell to pull the chick out?”

- Marie Mongon

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