

Handling Pain in Childbirth

Written by Annie Evett

Annie is a freelance writer, describes herself as a Thaumaturg (what mother isn't?) and an advocate for conscious parenting.

For most women, birthing is the first authentic experience they have getting in touch with themselves, their spirit and their inner strength. Although it is possible to labor with little or no pain, for most women the prospect is a terrifying unknown quantity, shrouded in secrecy and myths. Pain levels, for most women, seem to be influenced by the levels of fear and apprehension about the event, previous experience, the amount of mobility during labour, the sense of security and privacy they feel during birthing, the support given and accepted and cultural or religious ideas regarding childbirth. The relationship between each of these can cause an overwhelming amount of physical, emotional and spiritual pain.

Most midwives and doulas will encourage a detailed birthplan and it's wise to prepare yourself with strategies on coping with the changes your body will undertake whilst birthing. Until you are "there" you cannot safely say how you are going to cope or react to what is happening during childbirth. The pain has been described by some as cramping, stabbing or waves of pain throughout the body, through to a feeling of been torn apart. The wide range of experiences only upholds the fear surrounding childbirth, especially as every persons level and tolerance to pain is different. There are numerous reports of women who experience ecstasy or orgasmic feelings whilst birthing; so this cannot be discounted when you are preparing for birth and for managing the pain levels you may or may not experience.

Preparing for Childbirth Pain

There are three steps to maintaining and as best as one can – controlling your reaction to the pain in childbirth. Proper nutrition and gentle exercise throughout the pregnancy will maintain any health issues which may arise during pregnancy. Flexibility and core strength will also assist in a more comfortable birth and speedier recovery.

Preparing and learning methods to make yourself comfortable during labor is extremely important. For localized pain, things like hot and cold packs, tennis balls or massage pads to use in specific spots will be of great comfort. Fatigue is one of the biggest reasons women succumb to fearful beliefs. Staying hydrated and getting fresh air can also help pace the fatigue. Some women use aromatherapy, drinking herbal teas or eating a teaspoon of honey for energy.

Learning supportive positions is extremely important to manage any pain you may experience. Laying on your back to birth both causes unnecessary pain and inhibits the body mechanics of natural birthing. Allow gravity to assist as much as possible, but staying mobile and upright. Squatting, supported leaning or hanging (using a birthing rope from the ceiling) seems to alleviate most women's experience of pain.

Other Methods

- Hypnosis
- Yoga positions
- Meditation and visualizations
- Walking and pacing, rocking and swaying
- Massage or counterpressure techniques
- Changing position on a regular basis
- Taking a bath, shower or warm spa
- Distraction – undertaking an activity that keeps your mind otherwise occupied (I have heard of some women knitting or embroidering!)
- Constant, close support from your partner (or a trusted friend or loved one) for the duration of labor can reduce fear and anxiety.

It's important to remember that if pain medications are given systemically, your baby will also get a dose of them. The effect on the baby depends on how much and how close to birthing the drug is given to you. Many babies show signs of drowsiness immediately after birth after the mother has had pain medication, which can inhibit their initial progression and attachment.

What works?

Endorphins are present before, during, and immediately after childbirth and many believe that this hormone can induce feelings of pleasure and euphoria during childbirth. In fact, the same hormones are present during orgasm. It's up to the individual woman to process her beliefs and convictions with regards to childbirth, its meaning and her place with it. By supporting her health, both physically and emotionally, will best prepare her for birthing in the best possible space. Midwives, doulas and support people are best to encourage birthing women to make an informed decision about what pain techniques and birthing methods are right for them and to allow flexibility within the birthing plan to include whatever may occur.