

# Support in labour

for **women**

Giving birth is likely to be one of the most intimate and major life changing experiences of your life. As with any life changing event, the extent to which you feel supported, listened to and involved during your labour will affect your feelings about your birth experience. This leaflet looks at the diverse forms of support that can help you, not only from midwives, but also from a partner, relative or friend, as well as services offered by the private sector. These might include self-employed midwives as well as birth supporters in the form of doulas and complementary therapists.



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This leaflet is based on the best available research evidence and is one in a series of 25 Informed Choice topics

**This publication is designed to help you make the right choices for you and your baby.**

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Support can also refer to the use of facilities and the preferred environment for birth. This may be your home or another location, for example, a midwife led unit or birth centre, and the use of birthing pools and home-like settings, as well as main hospital based maternity units.

During your labour, support should also be offered through access to and availability of a range of equipment and props such as cushions, birthing balls and ropes as well as the provision of conventional delivery beds. Further information about the role of birth facilities can be found in the Informed Choice leaflets *Where will you have your baby?* and *Positions for labour and birth*.

## Research has shown that women in labour need:

- emotional support in the form of encouragement, praise, reassurance, being listened to and the continuous physical presence of another supportive person
- informational support consisting of explanations and suggestions, advice and information
- physical support in the form of comfort measures such as massage, cool compresses, ice chips, the use of water and equipment to help with comfortable positioning
- an advocate, so that your wishes can be represented to others; this may involve someone else acting on your behalf, when requested.



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## Support from your midwife

While the ideal situation would be for you to receive one-to-one care from a midwife during your labour, the reality is that midwives are often expected to care for more than one labouring woman at the same time, sometimes caring for women at higher risk of complications. As a result, it can be difficult for them to give you the continuous emotional, physical and practical support that they would like.

This is why the constant presence of a supportive birth companion is so important. One-to-one constant support throughout labour provides you not only with emotional support, but the ability to cope better with your labour. This means it can have a very positive effect on the progress of your labour and your feelings about the overall experience when you look back on it. For additional information see the Informed Choice leaflets, *Non-epidural pain relief*, *Where will you have your baby?*, *Positions for labour and birth* and *Do you want a waterbirth?*



## Fathers as supporters in labour and at the birth

Fifty years ago it was not common for fathers to be present at the birth, but over a relatively short time period it has now become the norm. Such changes have led to the assumption that the preferred birth companion for women is the father of their baby and that this must be of benefit to all concerned. Although many fathers will want to be there, this might not be right for everyone. Some may feel too anxious to be there and some women may just prefer that their partner were not present. This is why it's essential to discuss your fears and needs with your partner prior to labour. It may be helpful to ask yourself the following questions: Can your partner:

- comfort you physically and emotionally
- give you physical support
- understand what you need and want
- listen
- talk to the midwife and doctor on your behalf
- explain what you want from your labour
- encourage you
- be free whenever you go into labour
- be there all the time.



### Family and friends as supporters

Research has identified the value of being supported in labour by someone you trust and feel comfortable with so, as well as your partner, you may decide to choose other female companions, relatives and friends to accompany you. Studies show that where women have a choice for their birth partner, it has a positive influence on their satisfaction with the birth event. Your choice of birth partner may also include the services of trained lay attendants (doulas).



### Trained lay birth attendants (doulas)

The use of lay birth attendants has only recently emerged in the UK as a means of support. The idea of doula care is where a non-professional individual, usually female, is trained to provide continuous, non-medical, physical, social and informational support to you and your partner during your labour and the birth.

Doula support has been shown to positively enhance the experience in labour of specific groups of women such as women in prison and younger women. The positive presence of a supporter is reflected in research findings that show women who receive constant emotional and physical support from their partner, and from lay supporters felt they had a positive birth experience with less need for pain relief.

Apart from doulas, other lay people can also provide positive forms of support to the labouring woman. Some women may choose to have a complementary therapist with them; this could be a therapist trained in a specific technique, such as acupuncture. Some midwives are also trained in complementary therapy.

## The benefits of effective support – the evidence

Research shows that continuous support during labour is associated with:

- less use of pain-relieving drugs
- fewer caesarean section, forceps or ventouse births
- fewer reports of dissatisfaction with the childbirth experience.

Continuous support in labour has also been found to result in a slight reduction in the use of baby heart rate monitoring (electronic fetal monitoring – EFM) and with women reporting feeling more in control of their labour and birth experience.

## The woman's choice

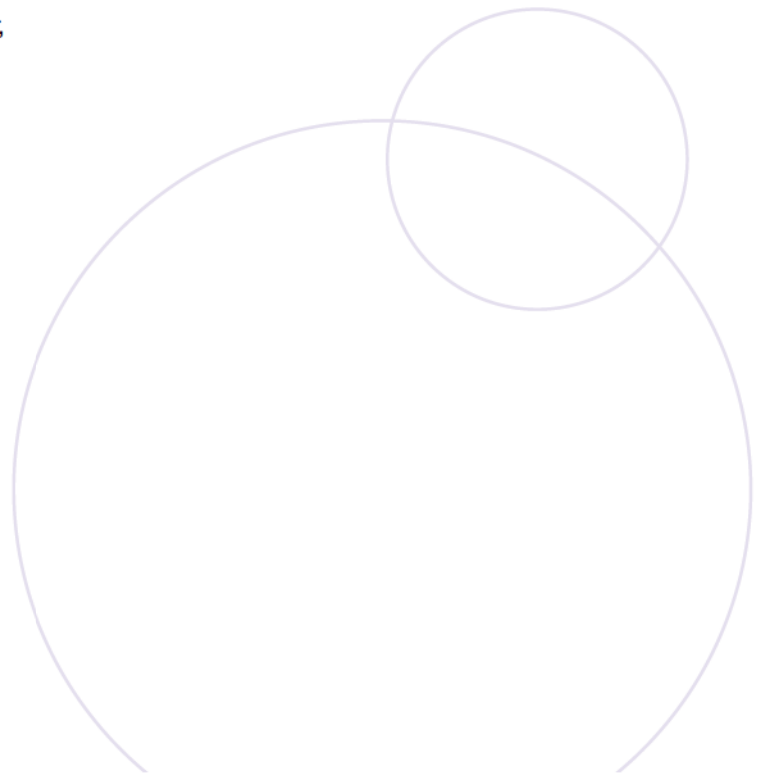
When thinking about who you want to provide support in labour, it's likely that cultural and religious values will also play a large part. In some cultures it is thought shameful or indecent for a man to be present, and women look for support from other women in the family.

This is why you need to carefully consider your choice of birth companions in the light of who will best be able to support your needs before labour. If you need additional information about sources of birth support, talk to your midwife and doctor.

## What we don't know

To date, research has only addressed some of the issues about support in labour. Examples of the information we do not have include:

- What should the support person do, or avoid doing, to be of most help?
- What are the personal qualities of a good support person?
- How can a woman best choose her birth companion(s)?
- What is the effect of continuous support from a health care professional (usually a midwife), in comparison to lay support, on both the physical and emotional outcomes of childbirth?
- What is the emotional and physical impact on male partners if they are birth supporters?



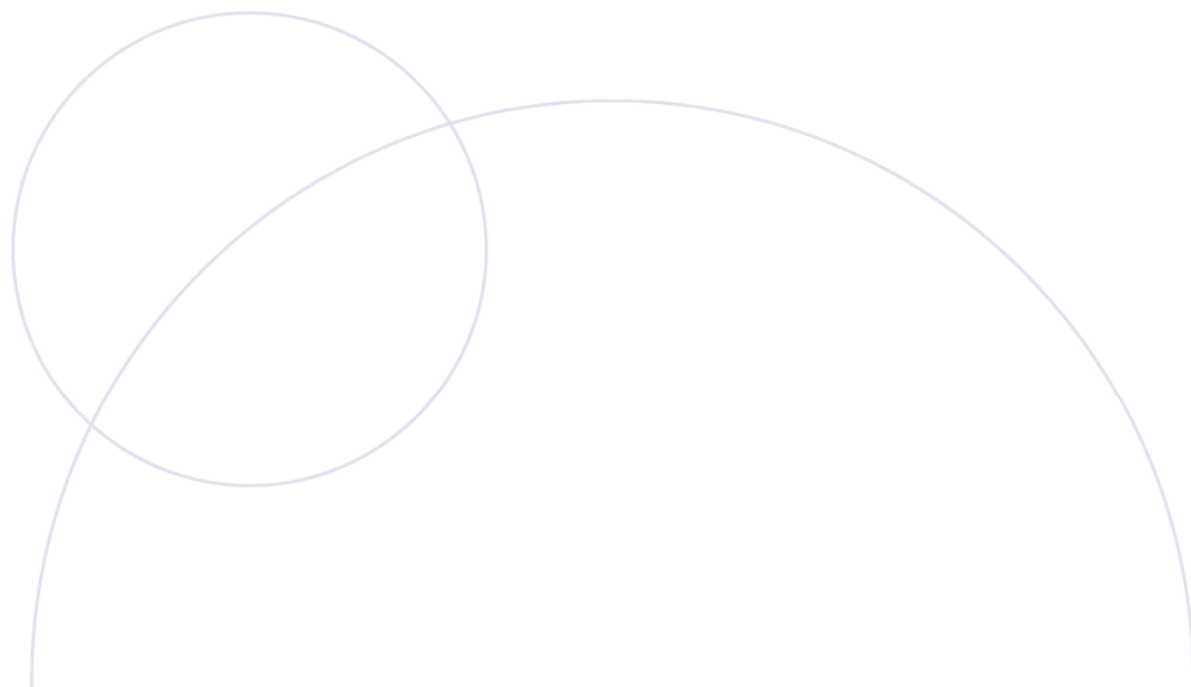
### What we do know

Even if you're accompanied by your partner during labour, you may benefit from the continuous presence of a second support person of your choice.

Given the clear benefits and no known disadvantages of continuous support in labour, every effort should be made to ensure that all women have support during labour.

If you have special needs, your midwife can advise you on relevant services, eg Linkworkers, British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters, Disabled Parents' Network ahead of the birth.

To find out more about your options, please discuss this leaflet and any questions you may have with your midwife or doctor. More detailed information can be found in the professionals' version of this leaflet.



## Questions you may want to ask

After reading this leaflet there may be some things you are still not sure about. You can use this space to write down any questions you may have and any things you would like to discuss with your midwife or doctor


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