

Getting ready
for labour and
birth

Relaxation and breath awareness

Being as relaxed as possible during labour will help to reduce pain by relieving tension; help your uterus to work better; and help you save energy (feeling stressed uses up energy!). You can learn to relax in labour using two simple techniques.

Basic relaxation technique

You don't need to be pregnant to benefit from this. It can help you cope with stress (and help you sleep) at any time in your life. Practise this technique at home once or twice a day for at least 10 minutes if you can. It's good if your partner or other support person understands the technique as well.

Find a comfortable position – sit or lie down on your side. Use pillows to support all the curves of your body. Play some relaxing music if you like.

Clench your right hand. Tense the arm muscles up to your shoulder. Now let go of the tension. Give a long, sighing, outward breath as you let go and relax. Feel your arm go loose. Be aware of how breathing out helps you relax. Relax more with each outward breath.

Repeat this with your:

- left hand and arm
- right foot and leg
- left foot and left leg.

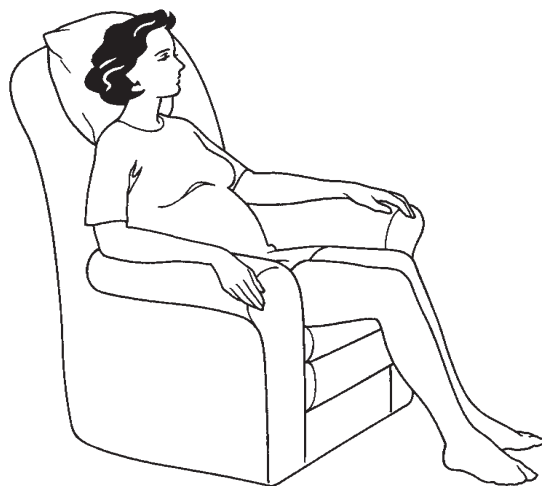
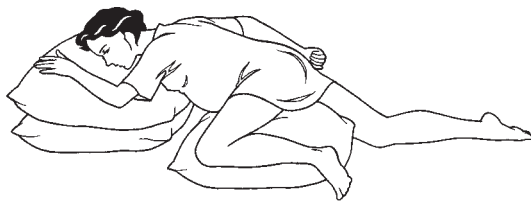
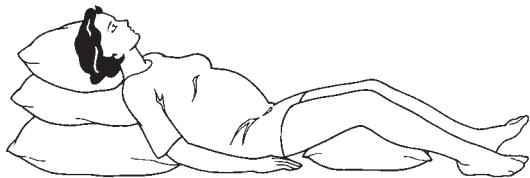
Bunch your shoulders up towards your ears. Feel how tense it makes you – now relax your shoulders as you breathe out.

Tighten the muscles around your genitals and anus (these muscles are part of your pelvic floor). Squeeze your buttocks together. Then let go as you breathe out.

Clench your jaw and frown, tightening your face and scalp muscles. Now breathe out and relax.

Once you've learned the difference between a tense muscle and a relaxed one, you can follow these steps without tensing your muscles first. Just release the tension from all the muscles of your body – from your face (including the jaw), arms and legs, buttocks and pelvis. Let go and allow them to rest completely.

Find a comfortable position



Breath awareness technique

People often take quick, shallow breaths when they're anxious or stressed. Doing the opposite – taking long, slow deep breaths – can help you feel calmer and more relaxed.

Being aware of your breathing in labour and slowing it down can:

- help release tension and help your body relax
- help you 'flow' with contractions rather than tense up against them
- help you fight any urge to push which you may feel at the end of the first stage of labour before the cervix is fully opened (your midwife or doctor will guide you so that you push at the right time)
- increase oxygen to the baby during labour
- help prevent rapid, shallow breathing (hyperventilation) which can give you 'pins and needles'.

Health alert! Labour is important for your baby

Babies benefit from both labour and vaginal birth for the preparation of their lungs for breathing. The contractions of your uterus help the baby prepare to take their first breaths.

Practising breath awareness

Try to breathe as slowly and deeply as is comfortable for you.

As you breathe out, try to let any tension flow out of your body, along with the air from your lungs. It may help to make a steady noise, sigh or a groan ('ahhh' or 'hmm') as you do this.

Practising positions for labour

Changing positions in labour can really help you manage your contractions and pain. But if you're not used to some of these positions (like squatting or rocking on your hands and knees) it's good to practise them during the pregnancy.

Stretches

Stretches can help you hold different positions in labour without getting too uncomfortable, relax tired muscles and keep you supple.

You can do stretches at any time in pregnancy. Hold each stretch for as long as possible (just a few seconds is fine). Gradually increase the time until you can hold the stretch for up to a minute.

Calf stretch

Stand facing a wall, about 30cm away. Put one foot about one metre in front of the other. Stretch your arms out to touch the wall, leaning your upper body forward. Bend your front knee, putting your weight onto the front leg. Hold the stretch and breathe into it. Repeat with the other leg.

Shoulder rotation

You can do this either standing or sitting comfortably on a chair. Put your fingers on each shoulder and make circles backwards with your elbows. Stretch your arms over your head to smooth out tightness in the shoulders and upper back. This helps ease pressure under the rib cage too.