



# Breathing and Relaxation

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Breathing techniques during labour will help you bring enough oxygen to both you and your baby and also reduce muscle tension.

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## Breathing

The natural reaction to pain or stress is to take quick, shallow breaths or to hold your breath and tense up.

Before labour, practise breathing and relaxation techniques with your partner/support person. The script to a progressive relaxation follows. You can listen to this script by clicking on the audio link in the online program and also download the file to use on your own mp3 player. Try to set aside 10-15 minutes a day and find a comfortable, quiet place to listen. With regular practice, over time simply starting the audio will cue you to breathe slowly and deeply, letting go of physical tension and easing into a state of mental calm and relaxation. This technique is very useful during labour and a valuable stress management skill throughout life.

## Breathing Patterns and Position Changes during Labour

During labour, use the breathing pattern that feels most comfortable and is working for you. Your support person can help you combine your breathing and relaxation with position changes and other comfort measures such as massage, hot or cold compresses, counterpressure, the birth ball, warm bath or sitting in the shower.

### Complete Cleansing Breath

- At the beginning and end of each contraction, breathe in as deeply as possible and with a full blow exhale through your mouth an equal amount of air.

### Slow Breathing

- Breathe in slowly and deeply, but not as deep as the cleansing breath.
- With each slow breath out, relax your shoulders, hands and face.
- Breathe about six to ten times per minute (half your normal breathing rate).



*Use of visual imagery helps bring your mind to a relaxing place. Its purpose is to reduce tension by focusing your attention on positive thoughts, comforting places and peaceful and calming images.*

## Light, Quick Breathing

- Use when you can no longer relax during contractions using slow breathing.
- As a contraction becomes more intense, use shallow, quick, rhythmical breathing in and out, about one breath every one or two seconds.
- Can combine slow breathing at the beginning and end of the contraction with light breathing at the peak of a contraction.

## Pant-Pant-Blow

Pant-pant-blow is an alternate breathing pattern if you have an overwhelming urge to push but your cervix is not quite fully dilated:

- Take a deep breath in.
- Breathe out with short pants and a longer breath – pant-pant-blow.
- Repeat until the contraction eases.

## Visualization and Guided Imagery

Visual imagery helps relax your muscles and lets your uterus do the work of softening and dilating your cervix. You can use an external focal point such as a favourite photograph/object or look into the eyes of your support person. You may find you prefer an internal focal point such as a relaxing memory or favourite piece of music that makes you feel good. Use images of sights, sounds, textures, tastes, colours, and scents that are relaxing to you. Take time to find the setting, music and voice that work best for you. As you breathe and focus with eyes closed during your contractions, the positive effects will help take you through your labour one contraction at a time. These techniques can be found as downloadable mp3s, on CDs in the library and in stores.

## Progressive Relaxation Audio Script

Relaxation is the cornerstone of comfort in labour. By allowing your uterus to do the hard work it needs to do to deliver your baby and keeping your other muscles relaxed during this process, you will not fatigue as easily and your labour will be less painful because you are not fighting it. Focusing on your breath during labour is important because it brings much needed oxygen to you and your baby, gives your mind something to think about, and aids in relaxation.

### **We will begin with relaxed breathing.**

Find a comfortable place where you can rest without distractions; either sitting or lying down. If you are sitting, prop a pillow under each arm. If you are lying down, place a pillow between your legs, one under the baby and one under your upper arm. This will enhance your relaxation.



Begin by gently closing your eyes and taking several big, deep breaths. Then allow your breath to be natural and comfortable. For now, just focus on your breath. Feel the sensations as the air enters your nose and flows down to your lungs. Notice how the air is cool when it enters your body and warm as it exits your body. Just breathe. Allow your abdomen to gently rise and fall outward rather than upward. This, too, will enhance your relaxation. Breathe. Imagine, as you inhale, that the air spirals down towards your lungs. As you exhale gently push the spiral back out. Each breath in is bringing in relaxation and each breath out is releasing tension. Breathe.

Bring your awareness to your head. Very slowly, as you continue to inhale and exhale, scan your body and consciously allow your muscles to relax. Relax the muscles in your forehead, around your eyes, and your jaw. Now allow the muscles in your shoulders to release, now your upper arms, lower arms and down to your fingertips. Let your abdominal muscles soften. Allow your gluteal muscles to let go... down to your thighs, your calves and your feet. Keep breathing. Again, bring your attention back to your breath. Focus on the exhale. When you focus on the exhale you will have to inhale again. It will help to keep you from holding your breath.

It is very important to practice paying attention to your breath. Though we have all been breathing since the day we were born, we rarely take the time to simply think about it. It may seem a bit frustrating at first. As you slow down and start to focus, you may find all sorts of distractions coming into your mind. Simply acknowledge your thoughts and feelings and let them pass by. Bring yourself back to your breath. You may have to do this many times, but eventually, little by little you will find you are able to sustain your focus for longer and longer periods. This skill will not only be useful to you in labour, but for many life situations.

As mentioned, relaxation is one of the most important tools for labour. The more relaxed you are, the quicker and easier your labour will be. Tension will work against one of the best natural pain killers your body produces, endorphins. Endorphins are morphine like chemicals that make you feel good.

### **Now, let's work on relaxing your body.**

It is important to practice relaxation on a daily basis and to start as early as possible in your pregnancy. Find a quiet place; take some slow deep breaths, in through your nose, out through your mouth.

Start with your eyelids, squeeze them tight for a few seconds, and then relax them, allowing them to get heavy. Now tense your jaw and relax it. Bend your head forward, feel the tension in your neck, and release that. Make fists with your hands, feel the tension in your hands. Slowly release your fists.

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## Focus on your breath.

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After you have completed the relaxation technique, remember what you feel like. This is how your body should feel during labour. It is important for both you and your partner to be aware when you are tense and when you are relaxed.

Continue taking slow deep breaths and imagine any further tension flowing down your arms, out through your fingers. Continue taking slow deep breaths while becoming more and more relaxed. Now tighten your abdominal muscles and release. Tighten your buttocks and release them. Squeeze your knees together, feel the tension in your thighs, and release.

Bend your toes up towards your head, feel the tension in your calves and your shins, slowly release it. Continue taking slow deep breaths and imagine any further tension flowing down your arms, down your legs, out through your hands and feet. As you continue to deep breathe, imagine your body is becoming very heavy, sinking into the floor.



Watch the online **Comfort Measures for Labour** video developed by Chatham Kent Public Health Unit

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Breathing & Relaxation  
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