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Today, one in five U.S. babies is delivered using natural pain-management strategies—and no narcotics.

special delivery

There are many drug-free ways to help ease the pain of labor. Here are 6 that really work.

WHEN MOST WOMEN hear the words *natural childbirth*, they cringe. The thought of going through labor and delivery without drugs seems almost impossible—which may explain why 80 percent of American moms-to-be opt for some form of powerful painkiller, usually via epidural analgesia in the lower back. In fact, if you're pregnant now, you're probably considering it. But as many as 800,000 women a year go through labor and delivery without resorting to drugs, and they aren't suffering as much as you might think.

Women opt for a natural delivery for many reasons: Some want to fully experience this amazing event; others want to keep narcotics away from

By DEBBIE KOENIG
Photography by KAREN PEARSON



Laboring in water eases both physical and emotional tension.

their babies; many just want to see if they can do it. Whatever the reason, there are numerous drug-free ways to help laboring women cope. We've examined six popular methods, which promise to do everything from help manage pain to eliminate it completely. Many can be used in combination and will help even if you want an epidural—after all, you may have hours of contractions before the anesthesiologist arrives.

Water

Warm water has long been considered an effective natural pain reliever, and its use is increasingly common during labor. Whether you are in a special birthing tub or just a shower, the effect is striking: In the

2002 survey "Listening to Mothers: Report of the First National U.S. Survey of Women's Childbearing Experiences," nearly 90 percent of women who labored in water reported it to be at least "somewhat helpful" at relieving pain. "The uterus is a muscle," explains William Camann, M.D., director of obstetric anesthesia at the Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston and author of *Easy Labor* (Ballantine, 2006), "and if you have a hard workout and your muscles get sore and cramp, a nice warm soak is one of the things that can make you feel better. This is the same idea."

Hillary Avis, 28, soaked in a birth tub provided by her midwife. "Water was heavenly," Avis says. "I was able to fall asleep between contractions

because the water was so relaxing." And Jill Bruce, 38, labored in water with her second daughter, Alina. "The hospital where I delivered had a large soaking tub, and I used it several times. It was much easier to relax through contractions in the warm water, and to visualize the baby moving down smoothly and in the correct position for birth," she explains.

If your pregnancy is full-term and low-risk, odds are you'll be able to soak for a while, though you're likely to get moved from the tub once your water breaks. Nearly every hospital and birthing center has a shower or a birthing tub (ask yours, to be sure). Water works in combination with many other pain-management techniques. Plus, it's free!

Self-hypnosis

This technique enlists the power of suggestion to disrupt the domino effect of fear-tension-pain. By studying and practicing a series of relaxation techniques (including deep-breathing exercises and visualization) and verbal affirmations, you'll learn to trust your body to give birth gently; proponents claim you'll be so relaxed, your body will just open naturally, letting the baby emerge. Surprisingly, many women report experiencing little or no labor pain at all, and the research seems to support that—a 2006 Cochrane Collaboration review of alternative therapies for pain management in labor found that hypnosis reduced the need for analgesia.

Memorie Carlson, 29, delivered her son, Blue, using the popular HypnoBirthing program (www.hypnobirthing.com). "I followed the program closely with daily meditation, visualizing the childbirth experience, and practicing body/mind exercises. The meditation eased my anxieties about childbirth," Carlson says,



Birth balls help you stay active and harness the power of gravity.

adding that she never even thought about taking painkillers once she was in labor. "Hypnosis helped make labor a loving, positive, completely natural experience."

Listening to CDs from www.hypnobabies.com helped Dorothy Brown, 35, deliver her daughter Sarah. "It's pretty amazing, considering that I'm a skeptic at heart, but when I

was silent, alone, and following the Hypnobabies techniques, I found the pain bearable," she says.

For it to be most effective, hypnosis requires a fair amount of preparation. You have to start several months before your due date and practice daily. You'll also need to inform doctors and nurses that no, thanks, you won't be pushing—speak to

your obstetrician or midwife about it beforehand, and be sure to spell it out in a written birth plan.

Birth balls

That same oversized ball you use for ab workouts at the gym can also be a comfort during childbirth, and it's now standard equipment at many hospitals and birthing centers. "The ball gets you out of bed. Women should not labor in a horizontal position—they should be standing, squatting, or sitting," says Marsden Wagner, M.D., a perinatologist and perinatal scientist, former director of women's and children's health for the World Health Organization, and author of *Creating Your Birth Plan* (Perigee, 2006). Indeed, natural childbirth proponents and an increasing number of obstetricians encourage laboring moms-to-be to move around and test different positions, both to ease discomfort and to let gravity help the baby move down the birthing canal. The ball offers plenty of ways to remain active even while attached to fetal monitors—for example, you can rock your pelvis freely, which can help the baby descend. Plus, the ball enables your partner to have better access to your back for those all-important rubs! While the ball won't eliminate pain, the gentle movements it promotes and the variety of positions in which you can labor will help reduce it.

Birth balls can be combined with any of the other methods discussed here. Ann Sharfstein, 30, used one in the shower. "I liked being under the spray of water, but I didn't want to stand—it was too tiring—and sitting directly on the floor of the tub wasn't comfortable. My midwife showed me how to place the ball in the shower so I could sit on it," she recalls.

Like laboring in water, birth balls require no advance preparation—just

make sure your hospital or birthing center provides them or allows you to bring your own (they're available at most sporting-goods stores).

The Bradley Method

The premise of this method (www.bradleybirth.com) is that labor hurts—but knowing how the body works during the process can reduce pain and make delivery more efficient. Unlike most childbirth classes, which last anywhere from a single weekend to several weeks, this course requires a 12-week commitment and covers everything from prenatal nutrition and physical training to postpartum care and breast-feeding. Small classes and lots of homework are the norm here, and it can pay off: More than 200,000 couples nationwide have used this method, and Bradley practitioners claim that more than 86 percent of participants have had successful, unmedicated births.

Bobbie Hartman, 38, and her husband, Mark, used the method to deliver their son. "The biggest advantage was the detailed information on the processes of labor," she says. "Every Saturday after class, Mark and I would go out to lunch to deconstruct what we'd heard that day. Sometimes we'd sit around rolling our eyes, but we also talked about what we

expected, what we were both afraid of, and what we could do to work around our fears."

The Bradley Method requires a lot of advance work and isn't cheap (most courses run over \$200), but it can reduce labor and delivery pain.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture has been used during childbirth in China for hundreds of years, but it has only recently entered American labor and delivery rooms—with promising results: The Cochrane Collaboration review found that acupuncture may indeed reduce labor pain. And acupuncturists also report success with two common pre-childbirth challenges: turning breech babies and inducing labor. Bob Flaws, a licensed acupuncturist specializing in Chinese medical gynecology and the author of *Path of Pregnancy: A Handbook of Traditional Chinese Postpartum Diseases* (Blue Poppy Press, 1993), explains how it works: "In Chinese medicine, pain is a manifestation of blocked qi [energy] and blood. Acupuncture frees the flow of the qi and blood, hence eliminating pain."

An acupuncturist came to 35-year-old Alexia Bennetts's Colorado home when her labor started. "She put in dermal tacks, which are tiny needles that are taped and left in spe-

TIPS FROM MOMS WHO'VE GONE NATURAL

"Stay flexible. My friends who had rough experiences were those who committed to doing natural birth no matter what."

—Dorothy Brown, mother of Sarah

"Remember that the birth is just a day or so in your life as a mother, so be open to any possibilities and focus on the birth of your child and your life as a parent."

—Ann Sharfstein, mother of Sadie

"Give yourself many options for pain-coping techniques, stay away from people who think they know everything about your experience, and don't invite people to your labor out of obligation."

—Memorie Carlson, mother of Blue

"Prepare as much as your mind needs to prepare, but know that your body is already prepared and will do it right even if you don't read every book!"

—Hillary Avis, mother of Jane

"The best advice I got was from a good friend who told me it's the baby's birth, and he or she would have the birth he or she needed, regardless of what I wanted."

—Bobbie Hartman, mother of Edgar

cific points to help promote labor.” Bennetts adds, “I was in and out of the bath and walked all around with the tacks. I believe it helped my labor go more quickly with a little less pain. When I got to the hospital about one hour after the needles were inserted, they said I was already dilated to eight [out of ten centimeters]. I couldn’t believe it.”

Finding an acupuncturist with prenatal experience can be difficult, so be sure to ask candidates if they’ve received formal training in labor and delivery. Also ask how many patients they’ve actually helped through labor, and how acupuncture affected those patients and whether you can talk to one of them.

Aromatherapy

For centuries, essential oils have been used to promote relaxation and re-

lieve tension—two crucial needs in childbirth. Whether applied to the skin mixed with oil or lotion, inhaled from a diffuser or pillowcase, or swirled into bathwater, certain oils can help laboring women remain calm and experience less pain: A 1994 study published in *Nursing Times* found that 62 percent of women who used aromatherapy during labor said it was effective. Even something as simple as a scented candle can be helpful—just make sure your childbirth facility allows candles.

“The scent of the essential oil reaches the limbic system,” explains aromatherapist and healer Françoise Rapp. This part of the brain manages basic functions such as blood pressure and heart rate, and it’s also where our emotions are processed. “During labor, a woman can reduce the pain, strengthen contractions,

relieve anxiety and nervous tension, and reduce fears by simply smelling her favorite essential oil.”

Improvised aromatherapy helped Jennifer Herrin, 44, during her second and third deliveries. “My husband started it by bringing me a magnolia blossom from our tree, just because he knew I loved the fragrance. As I inhaled the scent, I realized it helped me breathe more deeply and feel more relaxed. Then when I had my third baby a few years later, I intentionally used one of my favorite candles as a relaxation helper.”

Rapp recommends lavender oil for its calming properties and to increase the strength of contractions; rose oil to soften ligaments and make it easier to push the baby out; and jasmine oil to dull uterine pain, strengthen contractions, and increase milk supply. 🌿