

# Comfort Measures & Pain Management Options

Whether you prefer natural methods to stay comfortable or you're considering medical options for pain relief, understanding your choices can help you feel more confident and prepared for your labor experience. To find out about specific options available at your delivery hospital, talk to your doctor/midwife or consider taking a tour of the hospital's childbirth unit.

## The 3 Rs: Relaxation, Rhythm, Ritual

Childbirth educator Penny Simkin highlights the 3 Rs as key instinctual coping behaviors observed when someone is managing labor well.

- **Relaxation:** Reduce tension and stay calm with techniques like deep breathing and visualization
- **Rhythm:** Find a consistent, soothing pattern using rhythmic breathing or movement
- **Ritual:** Create a comforting routine like swaying, vocalization, repeating a phrase in your head or even touch from your support person. It's difficult to know in advance what ritual may work for you - they often tend to be unplanned.

## Medical Pain Management

- **IV pain medication:** These are medications (typically narcotics) given through a vein to relieve pain.
- **Nitrous oxide (AKA laughing gas):** Commonly used in dental procedures, this gas is breathed through a mask, wears off quickly after use, and can help to mildly reduce pain and anxiety during labor. Not available at all hospitals.
- **Epidural:** An injection of anesthetic near the spine to block pain from the waist down.

### Epidural Benefits

- Very effective pain relief
- Enables rest

### Epidural Risks

- May offer incomplete relief
- May cause low blood pressure or decreased fetal heart rate
- May cause side effects such as headache or sore back

### Impact on Labor

- Continuous fetal monitoring
- Must stay in bed
- May make pushing more challenging

## Non-Medical Comfort Measures

- **Creating a calm environment:** Dim lights, peaceful surroundings, soft music, privacy and warmth
- **Warm water:** Getting in the tub or shower can help relax muscles and provide pain relief
- **Touch and massage:** Gentle touch or massage can provide relaxation and comfort
- **Counterpressure:** A member of your birth team can apply pressure to specific areas, especially the lower back and hips, to help relieve back labor
- **Hot/cold packs:** Used to alleviate discomfort in lower back or other areas of tension
- **Visualization or meditation:** Focusing on an object or mental image, listening to music, or concentrating on your breathing pattern can shift attention from your pain
- **Deep breathing:** There are many different breathing patterns you can use during labor, but the key is finding a rhythm of deep, calming breaths that works for you. Practice before labor by using deep breathing to relax whenever you feel stressed.
- **Position changes and movement:** Using movement like walking or swaying and changing positions throughout labor can help reduce discomfort and improve fetal positioning. You can use a birth ball, peanut ball, or squat bar to help with positioning. See some options below.

## How Birth Partners Can Support

- Words of encouragement
- Help with changing positions
- Massage, counterpressure or hip squeezes
- Help you make decisions
- Hugging or swaying with you
- Getting water, ice, cold cloths, etc.

