



Evidence that Empowers!

By Rebecca Dekker, PhD, RN, APRN of EvidenceBasedBirth.com

Question: Why is my hospital encouraging me to stay home during early labor at term?

Answer: Research has shown that when people go to the hospital too early, they are more likely to receive unnecessary interventions. On the other hand, people who are educated on how to spend early labor at home have better outcomes and higher satisfaction than people who are admitted to the hospital in early labor.¹ Because of the risks of early admission, most people are encouraged to spend early labor at home, and wait until active labor to come to the hospital.^{2,3} Guidelines vary, but active labor usually starts sometime between 4 and 6 centimeters dilation.^{2,4}

Question: What can I do to stay comfortable at home?

Answer: A variety of comfort measures can be used at home! Comfort measures are important for early labor because they lower pain and anxiety, shorten labor, and increase your satisfaction. See the Table for ideas of how to stay comfortable. The best results occur when you combine multiple methods, so try more than one method at a time!⁵

Question: What are some reasons I should go to the hospital?

Answer: Talk with your labor support team about when it's time to go to the hospital—they may have special suggestions for you due to your unique situation, including your preferences for pain management and how far away you live from the hospital. Some common signs that you should go to the hospital include:

- If this is your first baby: contractions occur every 4 minutes, last at least 60 seconds each, and this pattern has been going on for one hour.
- If you have given birth before: contractions occur every 5-7 minutes and last at least 45 seconds each. The shift from early to active labor can be dramatic in people who have given birth before, so if you sense a significant change in your pattern, it's time to go!
- Severe pain or fatigue
- Fever or ruptured membranes
- Heavy vaginal bleeding

Table 1: Comfort Measures for Early Labor

Comfort Measures	Note
Breathing and Relaxation	Breathing and relaxation can be helpful when they are combined with other comfort measures, such as the ones listed below. We've provided a sample breathing and relaxation exercise on the back of this handout.
Continuous Support	Having a doula or support person stay with you continuously can improve your chances of having a vaginal birth. This person can provide you with emotional and physical support at home.
Eating and Drinking	It's important to stay nourished in early labor. Eat healthy, light snacks when you feel hungry, and take a sip of oral fluids in between each contraction. Staying hydrated helps shorten the length of labor.
Environment	One of the benefits of staying at home in early labor is that you can control the privacy of your environment, which can help labor progress. Some people find music helpful. Keep the lights dim, and consider using aromatherapy.
Distraction	Try going on a walk, watching a movie or show, or baking a treat to bring to the hospital with you. If it's night time or if you feel tired, lay down in a dark room with pillows and soft music, close your eyes, and take a nap.
Positions	Try lots of different upright positions! Walking and dancing can shorten labor and increase comfort—look for YouTube videos of women dancing in labor, and copy their moves! Try sitting on a birth ball if you have one, spend some time on your hands and knees, and rest in child's pose.
Massage	Massage can increase comfort and decrease anxiety. Your support person can rub your back in between contractions. During contractions, they can use their hands to put pressure on your sacrum or tailbone. This simple technique, called "counter-pressure," is especially good for back labor.
Water Therapy	Getting into a warm tub of water has been shown to increase comfort and relaxation during labor! If you don't have a bath tub, try a hot shower.
Words of Affirmation	Thinking of labor sensations as "positive and productive" can actually lower your perceived pain! Your support person can say words of comfort to you such as "You're doing wonderful," and "You were made to do this."

“**Bottom line: There are a variety of non-drug methods you can use to stay comfortable in early labor.**”

1. American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. (2017). Approaches to limit intervention in labor and birth. Committee Opinion No. 687.
2. McNiven, P.S., Williams, J. I., Hodnett, E., et al. (1999). An early labor assessment program: a randomized, controlled trial. *Birth*, 25(1), 5-10.
3. American College of Nurse Midwives. Promoting progress in labor. Accessed from BirthTOOLS.org.
4. Smith H, Peterson N, Lagrew D, Main E. (2016). Toolkit to Support Vaginal Birth and Reduce Primary Cesareans: A Quality Improvement Toolkit. Stanford, CA: California Maternal Quality Care Collaborative.
5. Chaillet, N., Belaid, L., Crochetière, C., et al. (2014). Nonpharmacologic approaches for pain management during labor compared with usual care: a meta-analysis. *Birth*, 41(2), 122-137.





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Sample Relaxation and Breathing Exercise

The support person will read this to the birthing person, after the birthing person is in a completely comfortable position:

Alright, when you're ready, go ahead and close your eyes if that feels right to you. And let's start by relaxing your muscles. Shrug your shoulders up. Feel the tension in your shoulders and neck. Now relax your shoulders. Relax. Let them fall down, down, down. Now feel your head. Let your head sink into your pillow, like gravity is pulling it down. Let your head release into that gravity. Now feel your jaw. Relax your jaw. Let it fall, while keeping your mouth closed. Put the tip of your tongue behind the back of your top teeth. Squeeze your eyelids shut and scrunch up your face. Now let it relax. Now I want you to squeeze your hands into fists just ever so briefly, then release. And let your hands and arms relax and fall limp. Now I want you to notice your legs. Feel how heavy they are. Let them fall into the gravity, and be supported by that feeling of gravity. Now they feel limp, loose, and heavy. Now relax your shoulders even deeper. And let your head sink even deeper into your pillow.

Now we're going to focus on your breathing. You're going to learn how to do abdominal breathing. Place your hand on your abdomen, gently. Now when you take a deep breath in, focus on your abdomen rising up. And when you exhale, it should go back to normal. Try it a few times. It might feel different. [Pause]. So many people breathe with their shoulders. But to really relax, you need to learn how to breathe with your abdomen. Let's try it again. Breathe in, abdomen goes up and out, breathe out, abdomen shrinks back in. Breathe in, abdomen goes up and out, breathe out, abdomen shrinks back down. Try to keep up that same pattern as we now focus on making your breaths deeper and more calming.

Now I'm going to ask you to take a slow, deep breath in through your nose, then breathe out making a quiet sound like you are frosting a windowpane, but keep your mouth closed. At the end of each breath in and each breath out, you will pause just a few seconds when I say hold.

[Make sure to read slowly]. Alright, breathe in through your nose, one, two, three, and hold. Now breathe out with the frosting sound, one, two, three, and hold. Breathe in, one, two, three, four, hold. Now breathe out, one, two, three, four, and hold. This time five. Breathe in, one, two, three, four, five, hold. Now breathe out, one, two, three, four, five, and hold. Again with five. Breathe in, one, two, three, four, five, and hold. Breathe out, one, two, three, four, five, and hold. Now keep doing this for a little bit.... Keep breathing in deeply and slowly, pausing for a few seconds, and breathing out deeply and slowly, and pausing for a few seconds.

Now let yourself breath slowly in a manner that's comfortable to you. And remember that you can do these deep, calming breaths whenever you want, and they will help keep you calm.

Words of Affirmation

It can help to think of labor as positive and productive. Here are some sample words of affirmation that you can say to yourself, or ask your partner to say to you!

- I trust in my ability to birth my baby.
- I am calm. I am at peace.
- I feel safe and strong while I birth my baby.
- I open like a flower.
- I am surrounded by people who love and care for me.
- I am looking forward to giving birth.
- I welcome my baby on this birth day, with joy, peace, and excitement.
- I am remembering to breathe and stay calm.
- My body and baby are healthy and strong.
- I am ready. Birth is normal.
- These sensations aren't stronger than me, because they come from me.
- I am prepared for whatever happens during birth.
- I am remembering all the women who came before me.
- Everything is going well.
- I am prepared for the birth that my body needs.
- My baby is the perfect size for my body.
- I have courage, I was born to do this.
- Every sensation brings me closer to meeting my baby.
- Each wave brings me closer to shore!
- I can do this. I am doing this!

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