

Think of
working with
the pain rather
than trying to
remove it.

putting labour pain in its place

Worried about the pain of giving birth? A few nerves are only natural – after all, you're about to take part in life's most amazing event. But – as feeling frightened makes labour tougher – it pays to see what you can do to overcome your fears.

Relax – you can do it!

Giving birth is a natural process and even if you haven't spent the past nine months reading medical textbooks, your body and your baby know exactly what to do. That's why, although your baby isn't ticking off the days on a calendar, he or she can tell when it's time to be born. When that day arrives, your baby sends a signal across the placenta – a message that tells your body to begin contractions.

So what is this signal? It's a hormone, oxytocin, that triggers contractions and keeps them coming. Alongside oxytocin, another hormone, prostaglandin, gets to

work, softening the neck of the womb (the cervix) so it can open up (dilate) to allow your baby through. But not only does your body know how to make labour happen, it also knows you need to cope with pain, so it produces its own painkillers, endorphins. Similar to the painkiller morphine, endorphins not only limit pain but lower stress and have a feelgood factor too.

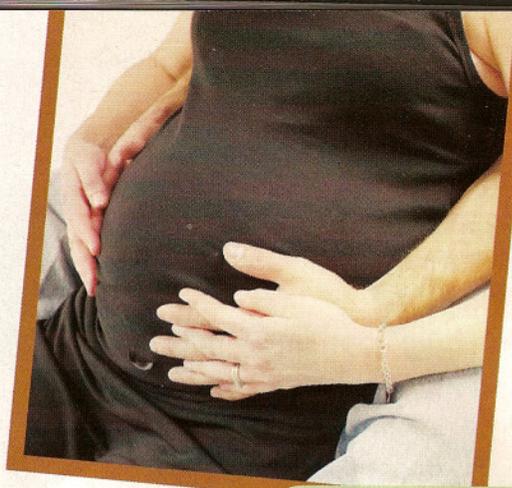
Labour is complex, but your body is in control. You just need to let it do what comes naturally. The problem is that fear upsets this amazing process. In fact, fear makes you release another hormone altogether – adrenaline – which slows down the

production of oxytocin and prepares your body to fight or run away (not helpful when you're trying to give birth). In this state of tension your contractions are less efficient and you focus on the pain, making labour last longer and the pain feel worse.

So staying calm is the key to coping with pain. To help you feel relaxed, read up on what happens during labour, choose a place to give birth where you feel safe, and have a birth partner you know and trust.

Breathing

When you're frightened you may hold your breath or breathe very rapidly, adrenaline levels rise and labour may falter. Breathing slowly through your contractions helps you to keep calm and keeps your womb supplied with oxygen. To calm yourself, breathe in deeply through your nose and sigh out slowly through your mouth.



Best birth tips...

- **Go with the flow** Giving birth is an instinctive thing. So give your brain a break and do what your body tells you. If you want to walk, walk. If you want to moan and groan – do it.
- **Ride that wave** Contractions come in waves. Ride over the peak and there'll be a lull before the next one arrives. So, although the journey through labour can be long, there are frequent stops when there is no pain and you can rest.
- **The comfort zone** Stress will put your body into panic mode, sending blood to the brain and muscles of your arms and legs instead of the womb. If you're relaxed labour will flow naturally. So keep lights low and the environment peaceful.
- **Supporting cast** A birth partner who's there for you from start to finish, and who helps in any way you need (from massage to simply holding your hand), makes all the difference.

Having the right person or people with you during your labour can be more important than pain relief, so think about the birth partner you would like with you. Who calms you down when you're anxious? Who don't you mind seeing when you're worried or upset? Who is a calming influence? It might be your partner, but it might be your mum, your best friend, your sister. On the day, you may want the person to keep quiet and leave you alone – but just knowing they are there may help.

Labour step-by-step

Labour is hard work – that's why it's called labour. But if you have a realistic idea of the mental and physical demands you will find yourself better able to cope with the pain of labour.

The first stage Contractions start to open the cervix. At first, these contractions are short and far apart but they gradually get more painful. This pain, however, has a purpose – to trigger the release of more hormones, and open your baby's route to the world. When your cervix is open 10cm, you are at the end of the first stage of labour – with a first baby this may take between six and 20 hours.

Transition The end of the first stage of labour is often called transition. Contractions are long and powerful, and you may feel angry, shaky or sick, although not all women feel anything different. How long transition lasts varies greatly.

The second stage This stage often lasts between one and two hours with a first baby, and is the time when your baby passes down through your pelvis and vagina and is born.

The third stage It's not quite over! This final stage is when you deliver the placenta.



Use your BRAIN

When you're in labour, there are lots of options to help with pain. Read up on the pros and cons beforehand then, on the big day, go through the BRAIN analysis to remind yourself of everything you need to consider. Ask:

- What are the Benefits?
- What are the Risks?
- What are the Alternatives?
- What do my Instincts tell me?
- What if I do Nothing?

soothe that pain

To help you make the choice that is right for you, you need to find out the pros and cons of each type of pain relief.

Water

Water soothes pain and, in a large birthing pool, enables you to glide into any position. A hot shower on your back or a warm bath at home can help too. (You may want to block your bath's overflow so the water's as deep as possible, but watch the taps!)

Thumbs up Drug-free.
Thumbs down Water's great, but sometimes it can slow down labour, particularly if you get in too early. Also make sure the water feels warm but not hot.

Complementary therapies

Various therapies are available – acupuncture, aromatherapy, homeopathy, yoga, self-hypnosis and massage. On the whole, little research has been done, but studies show acupuncture is helpful and the results of massage are promising.

Thumbs up Your birth partner may help with massage. (Find a registered practitioner for other therapies – www.icmedicine.co.uk).
Thumbs down Though many mums find some therapies help, there is little research to show what is most helpful. With many therapies you may need someone else to apply it to you.

Position and movement

Gravity is powerful, so go with it. Staying upright (for example, standing or kneeling) keeps labour hormones flowing and gives your baby maximum room to manoeuvre. You can lean forward to rest your weight on your partner, a bean bag, or any convenient surface at the right height. Movement – walking, swaying – also lends labour a helping hand.

Thumbs up Maximises your body's ability to give birth.
Thumbs down No downside – you're doing what comes naturally.

TENS

A TENS machine transmits mild electrical impulses to pads on your back. These block pain signals and help your body to produce endorphins.

Thumbs up Many mums find TENS helpful, especially in early labour.
Thumbs down It may help less as labour strengthens. You also won't be able to use it in water.



Remember:
each contraction
brings you closer
to meeting
your baby.