



York Teaching Hospital  
NHS Foundation Trust

# Coping Strategies in Labour

Information for women

## **Maternity Services**

① For more information, please contact:

Your Community Midwife or the Maternity Ward Clerk

Telephone Scarborough: 01723 342124

Telephone York: 01904 726720

Caring with pride



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This leaflet aims to provide you with the information necessary to make an informed choice regarding available forms of pain relief and suggests coping strategies for use during labour.

Pain is a normal response to the natural process of labour. The body itself releases endorphins in response to pain; these are naturally produced painkillers, which can be very effective. However, in situations of increased stress and anxiety the body also releases adrenaline, which inhibits the beneficial effect of endorphins. Relaxation and a feeling of wellbeing helps your body to release endorphins however which helps the progress of labour.

You may also want to consider practicing relaxation techniques in preparation for labour. Courses in hypnobirthing are also available; ask your Midwife for the leaflet 'Information about Hypnobirthing', or you can find this on the Trust website.

By using simple coping strategies that can be adopted at home and continued on delivery ward with the support of your midwife, you can help reduce stress and anxiety so enabling the release and effectiveness of your body's own endorphins. If necessary, drugs are also available for greater relief though all have side effects.

This leaflet will help you decide what is best for you.

# Latent Phase of Labour

## What is the Latent Phase of Labour?

The latent Phase (early or pre first stage) of labour is a period of time where labour is not necessarily continuous when:

- There are painful contractions;
- There is some cervical change, including cervical effacement and dilatation up to 4cm.

This stage of labour is unique to each woman and the duration varies considerably. It is very common for the contractions to appear continuous and then to stop and start again, sometimes over a period of more than 24 hours. Tightening of the uterine muscles may be felt in the lower abdomen or back and they are generally longer, stronger and more frequent than the Braxton Hicks tightening's.

## **Coping Strategies that can be adopted at home**

Home provides a calm secure environment that allows your body to produce the hormones required to help the flow of labour. Here are some of the coping strategies that you can use:

- ❖ Nesting - Create a quiet, relaxed atmosphere to encourage calm and rest.
- ❖ Relaxing - Use water and heat (e.g. shower, bath or hot water bottle), listen to music.
- ❖ Energise – Keep eating and drinking regularly, particularly carbohydrates for energy (e.g. pasta, potatoes, bananas and cereal bars). Rest in an upright position with the help of pillows, chair or birth ball.
- ❖ Mobilise – Upright positions such as sitting on birthing ball, leaning over a chair or in all fours position, gentle walks.
- ❖ Pain relief – TENS (transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation) can be beneficial in the latent phase of labour
- ❖ Paracetamol (taken as per manufacturer's instructions) can be taken safely.

## **T.E.N.S.** (Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation)

TENS works in the same way as massage. A TENS machine emits small electrical pulses that block the pain messages being sent to the brain by your uterus and cervix. The electrical pulses also stimulate the release of endorphins (your body's own painkillers). The electric pulses are transmitted from a small hand held box through two pairs of self-adhesive electrodes applied to either side of the spine.

### **Advantages**

- ❖ There are no known side effects to either mother or baby. TENS will not make you feel sick or drowsy
- ❖ Easy to use
- ❖ Women have full control over it and can increase intensity as they require
- ❖ Can provide some degree of pain relief
- ❖ Can be used in conjunction with most other forms of pain relief

### **Disadvantages**

- ❖ Not all women find it effective
- ❖ Help will be required to apply electrodes
- ❖ Cannot be used in water
- ❖ There is a cost involved to hire if you wish to use it at home

## How a birth partner can help

- ❖ Holding and cuddling can have a calming effect.
- ❖ Gentle pressure on the shoulders and hips may release tension.
- ❖ Back rubbing using the palm of the hand in long strokes down the side of the spine and over the buttocks if required is soothing, along with slow, firm circular strokes over the lower spine. A lubricant, such as gel, oil or talc can be used to prevent friction.

Sometimes however you may feel that you do not want to be touched or find this irritating. Birthing partners should be aware that this can be completely natural, even when, normally you would appreciate massage and touch.

## How long should you stay at home?

If you need advice or reassurance from a Midwife at any stage of labour the numbers below can be used. A midwife is always at the end of the phone to help plan the right time for you to come to hospital for assessment. If labour is not established and there are no concerns you will be supported to return home to await events.

Scarborough Labour Ward:	01723 342124
Scarborough Hawthorn Ward:	01723 385272
York Labour Ward: (10pm-7am)	01904 726004
York Maternity Triage: (7am-10pm)	01904 725924



## **Drugs Available for Pain Relief in established Labour**

Once you are in established labour, drugs are available that you can use in addition to the coping strategies discussed previously. While the drugs are stronger they all have side effects.

## **Entonox Inhalation Analgesia**

(via mouthpiece), clear instructions on use will be given.

Entonox is short acting and takes approximately 20 seconds to take effect and 20 seconds to be eliminated. It will not take away all the pain but can ease the severity of the pain. Entonox also be used in conjunction with all others forms of pain relief.

### **Advantages**

- ❖ Self-administered
- ❖ Immediate effect
- ❖ No known harmful side effects to mother or baby

### **Disadvantages**

- ❖ May experience nausea and vomiting
- ❖ Initial light headiness/feeling of 'not being in control' experienced by some women may be disliked
- ❖ Can be tiring if used for a prolonged period

## Meptid

Meptid belongs to the same family as opioids and has very similar side effects. The main difference between meptid and other opioids is that it is not as strong so can be given more often. It will usually be given with an anti-sickness drug, and is given as an injection into your buttock or thigh muscle.

### Advantages

- ❖ Can be an effective form of pain relief during labour
- ❖ Can be given every two to three hours
- ❖ Can be used during transition (this is the end of the first stage of labour as the second stage is beginning but not quite established), in preference to opioids as the effects do not last as long
- ❖ It is less likely to make you feel dizzy or out of control, which are side effects associate to opioids

### Disadvantages

- ❖ Can cause nausea and vomiting
- ❖ Can take up to twenty minutes to become fully effective
- ❖ Will cross the placenta and can make the baby 'sleepy'
- ❖ Can cause drowsiness

**Opioids** (Pethidine, Morphine, diamorphine)  
(The opioid used at our hospitals is generally pethidine)

Opioids are given as a single injection into your buttock or thigh muscle. Opioids take effect in about 20 minutes and the effects last between two and four hours.

## **Advantages**

- ❖ Can induce relaxation and rest in the early stage of labour
- ❖ Also useful during a long labour to induce rest
- ❖ Can provide effective pain relief during labour
- ❖ These drugs do not remove the pain completely but they dull the pain, helping you to cope

## **Disadvantages**

- ❖ Can cause nausea and vomiting
- ❖ Can cause dizziness and restricted mobility
- ❖ Can cause drowsiness and a feeling of being 'out of control'
- ❖ Will cross the placenta and can make the baby 'sleepy'
- ❖ Opioids can affect the baby initiating breathing if given close to birth
- ❖ Opioids can slow down the ability of the stomach to empty, so diet will be restricted during active labour

## Epidural

An epidural is an injection of local anaesthetic given via a small tube into your lower back. The local anaesthetic numbs the nerves that carry pain messages from your lower body to the brain. Once working effectively this gives a very effective form of pain relief and a pain free labour.

This procedure has advantages and disadvantages associated with it. There is a separate information leaflet 'Pain relief in labour, epidurals and spinals' available for women considering an epidural; this is available on our website or from your midwife.

## References

National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (2014) Intrapartum Care of healthy women and their babies during childbirth Guidelines Nice London

The Royal College of Midwives (2012) Evidence based guidelines for Midwifery-Led care in Labour Latent Phase

## **Tell us what you think of this leaflet**

We hope that you found this leaflet helpful. If you would like to tell us what you think, please contact:

The Clinical Midwifery Manager, The York Hospital,  
Wigginton Road, York, YO31 8HE or telephone  
01904 726720.

## **Teaching, Training and Research**

Our Trust is committed to teaching, training and research to support the development of health and healthcare in our community. Healthcare students may observe consultations for this purpose. You can opt out if you do not want students to observe. We may also ask you if you would like to be involved in our research.

## **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)**

PALS offers impartial advice and assistance to patients, their relatives, friends and carers. We can listen to feedback (positive or negative), answer questions and help resolve any concerns about Trust services.

PALS can be contacted on 01904 726262, or email [pals@york.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@york.nhs.uk).

An answer phone is available out of hours.

Please telephone or email if you  
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