

# Labour of Love??

Will labour hurt? Why does it hurt? What will it feel like? Will I be able to cope? These are some of the questions women ask me when attending my antenatal courses and although each woman's labour experiences are different, there are some common factors.

## Will labour hurt?

Most women who have experienced labour contractions agree that they hurt to some degree, but how much really depends on your pain threshold and how you feel about labour.

**Food:** It's hard work – that's why it's called labour, and just as you wouldn't starve yourself if you were going to run a marathon, you shouldn't when you are in early labour. It's really important that you eat in early labour: light, easily prepared and easily digestible food, like beans on toast, will help you store some energy for the marathon ahead.



*"It's really important that you eat in early labour"*

**Environment:** The hormones a woman produces for labour are the same as those she produces when she feels romantic, safe, loved. In fact when a woman is aroused and being intimate with her partner she produces oxytocin, the hormone of love. Oxytocin is also known as the squeezey hormone as it is responsible for making the uterus contract in labour, and is also involved in squeezing out milk from the breast when baby is feeding. For a woman to produce oxytocin she needs to feel like she would if she



*"Soft lighting, privacy, warmth, music, cushions, a bath perhaps"*

were intimate with her partner, and for this to happen most women need the environment to be right. Soft lighting, privacy, warmth, music, cushions, a bath perhaps and, of course, the right partner. Just as if you were planning a romantic evening in, thought and preparation needs to be applied to your place of birth. Where will you feel most at ease, safe and private?

## Why does it hurt?

The uterus is a large muscle that contracts all the way through pregnancy (Braxton Hicks contractions), which are rarely painful but just feel like your whole tummy is tightening for a few seconds. When labour starts, these tightenings become stronger and more regular. At the bottom of the uterus is the cervix, a tightly closed sphincter muscle that needs to soften and then stretch open to let your baby out. Just like any other sphincter in your body (there's one in your bottom) the environment needs to be right for it to open. Think about

going to the toilet – most people require privacy – and the same applies to labour. Get the environment right and you are on your way to encouraging your body to produce the hormones it needs to open up and let your baby out. The contractions shorten the muscle fibres of the uterus which in turn, pull on the cervix and cause it to thin and then slowly stretch open. If your baby is in a good position with his head down and back towards your left hand side his head will also be pushing down on the cervix and encouraging it to open. But it's the opening of the cervix that causes most of the discomfort that labour pains bring. Rather than seeing that pain as a negative thing, try and imagine that each contraction is pulling and shortening the cervix, like a tight polo-neck jumper, to make enough room for your baby to get out. With each contraction, the muscle fibres of the uterus get a little bit shorter so just focus on one contraction at a time and know that each contraction brings you one step closer to your baby.



*"Rather than seeing the pain as a negative thing . . . know that each contraction brings you one step closer to your baby"*

## What will it feel like?

Some women describe labour pains as very strong period pains. Some have pain in their lower back, particularly if the baby isn't in a good position and has his back towards your back, and some have pains down

their thighs. Some find the pain bearable and are able to breathe through the contractions, others find them overwhelming.



*"Your body was created to do this and you were given the resources to cope"*

The thing to remember is that no matter how strong they get, there is a gap in between. Contractions start gently, and then get steeper – a bit like walking up a steep hill – and then you reach the peak when they are at their strongest, and then they start to wear off – just like walking back down the hill having seen the lovely view from the top. Tell yourself that you can do it, you can keep going, and any time you feel like you can't just try and do one more. Your body was created to do this and you were given the resources to cope – you just have to unlock them!

### **Will I be able to cope?**

That really depends on a number of things:

Have you got your environment right? Is it safe, and warm, with dim lighting, gentle music? Do you have a confident birth supporter with you who believes that you can do this?

Have you had a healthy pregnancy? Are you informed – do you understand what's going to happen and why? Do you believe your body can do this? Are you ready?

Do you know the importance of staying calm – how stress and adrenalin will counteract the production of the hormones your body needs to labour well? Have you learnt how to breathe and relax your muscles? Have you practised forward leaning positions that you feel comfortable in for labour? Do you have pillows, balls, mats, and beanbags to help you adopt the positions you've chosen? Have you eaten; do you have some snacks (e.g. wine gums release energy slowly) to keep your energy up? Are you keeping your bladder empty by going to the toilet every two hours?

Consider hiring a TENS machine to help you stay at home as long as possible. TENS machines encourage endorphin release (endorphins are your body's natural pain killers) and you need someone to help you put it on as soon as you think your contractions are regular. They are ideal to have at home as they can just help you cope for a little bit longer. You don't want to get to hospital (if you're not staying at home) too early. Consider hiring a birth pool for a home birth or see if the poolroom is free when you get to your chosen birthplace. Warm water can really help with the discomforts of labour and the water means you will find it easier to change positions as the water supports your weight.



*"Consider hiring a TENS machine to help you stay at home as long as possible"*

Find out what other methods of pain relief your midwife has for a home birth or your birth centre/hospital uses. Read up on the benefits and risks of each so that if you need some extra help, you are making an informed choice.

Most importantly, be informed, research what's right for you and believe in your body's ability to birth your baby. You are only going to have this baby once – enjoy it!

***Written by Joanne Dell, antenatal teacher and owner of***



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