

Labor Support Cards

Simple tips for the special time before a birth



CHRISTIANA CARE
HEALTH SYSTEM

Women's Health Services



- Understanding labor pain 1
- Positions & movements 5
- Breathing, vocalizing & relaxing 16
- Imagination & perception 20
- Touch & massage 24

What's Inside

●	Understanding labor pain	
	The fear – pain cycle	1
	The effects of stress	2
	Pain versus suffering	3
	Gate theory: matching the pain	4
●	Positions & movements	
	The walkabout	5
	The labor dance	6
	The dangle	7
	The lift	8
	Leaning positions	9
	Sitting positions	10
	Reclining	11
	Side-lying	12
	Freedom positions	13
	Hands and knees	14
	In water	15
●	Breathing, vocalizing & relaxing	
	Breathing techniques	16
	Vocalizing	17
	Muscle relaxation	18
	Progressive muscle relaxation	19
●	Imagination & perception	
	Mental relaxation	20
	More visualization prompts	21
	Breath awareness	22
	Wave exercise	23
●	Touch & massage	
	General tips for touch and massage	24
	Counter pressure	25
	Foot massage: stroking touches	26

Understanding Labor Pain

The fear – pain cycle

What you think and do can affect how you feel.

The birth experience will be better and easier if you think and do things that **ease your fear** and **relieve tension**.

Why:

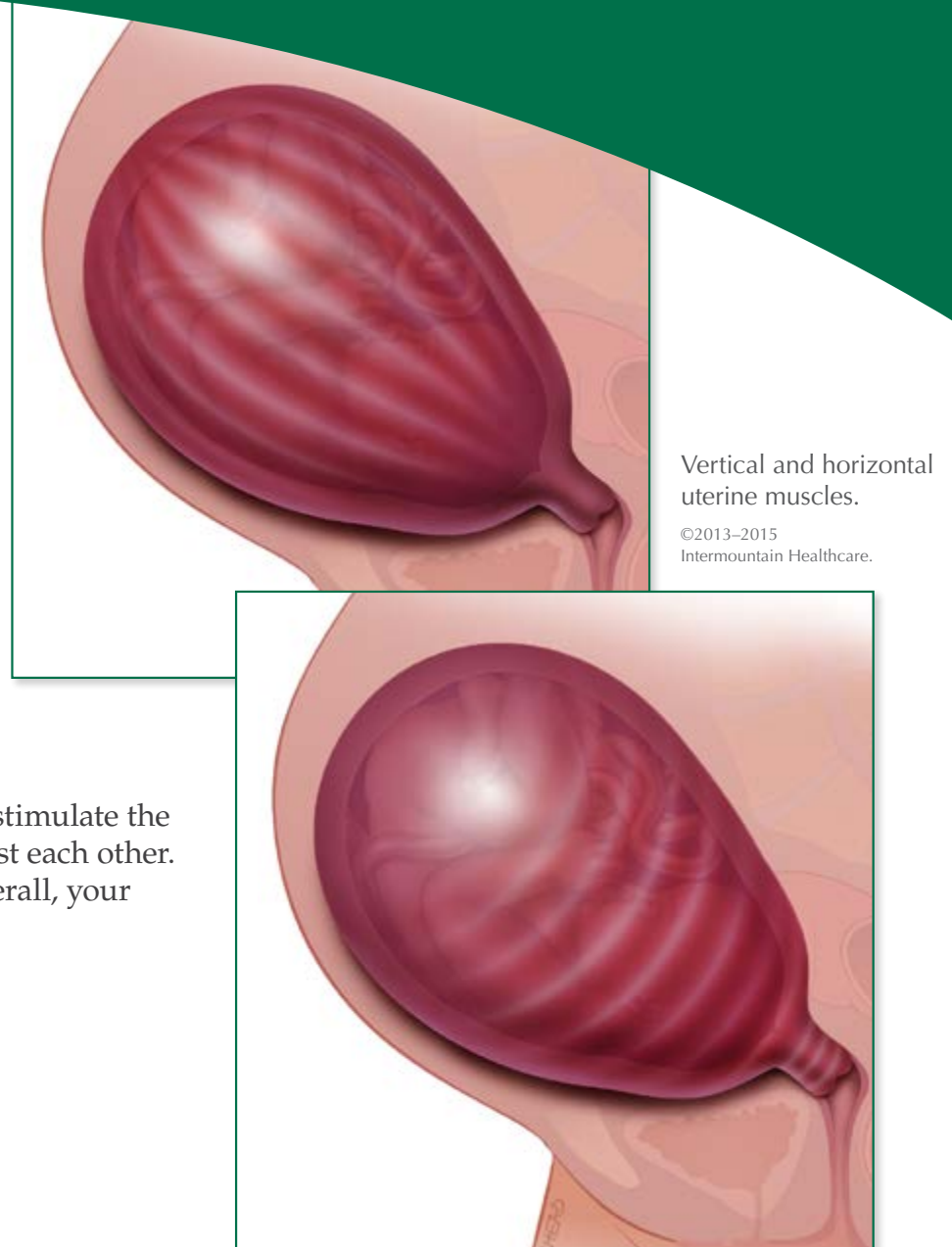
Your uterus is made of layers of strong muscle.

- **One layer of muscles runs lengthwise along the uterus. *DURING* labor**, these vertical muscles contract to pull the cervix back and push the baby down.
- **Another layer runs around the side of the uterus. *AFTER* labor**, these horizontal muscles contract to pull the cervix and uterus back in place.

When you feel afraid during labor, your body releases hormones that stimulate the horizontal muscles. This forces the two layers of muscle to work against each other. The result is more pain — and then more fear because of the pain. Overall, your labor may be longer and more painful.

How:

Interrupt the fear – pain cycle by using the techniques described in these Labor Support Cards.



Understanding Labor Pain

The effects of stress

It helps to recognize your own early signs of fear and stress. The earlier you **notice these signs**, the easier it will be to manage them and avoid being overwhelmed.

Why:

Fear and stress show up in your emotions and body.

- You may feel restless and irritable. Your thoughts may be disorganized or negative. You may feel angry.
- Your muscles may feel tight and stiff. Your breathing may feel shallow and fast. Your whole body may feel on edge, oversensitive.

How:

During labor, regularly “check in” with yourself. Take time to notice your thoughts, feelings, and reactions. Think about your breathing. Do a head-to-toe inventory of your muscles and posture. Ask yourself, “Where is my stress?”

What you notice can help you focus your efforts to manage the intensity of labor. Self-awareness is an important part of these Labor Support Card activities.



Understanding Labor Pain

Pain versus suffering

Another way to think about interrupting the cycle of fear and pain is to consider **the difference between pain and suffering**. Pain is discomfort that comes from intense sensations. Suffering is an emotional reaction — it's the distress and helplessness you may feel when you're in pain.

Why:

Research shows that suffering, not pain, is the cause of difficulty in labor. People are afraid of suffering — afraid of feeling out of control and alone. This fear can feed into more pain.

How:

You can cope with pain and avoid suffering during labor. The activities in these Labor Support Card can help you do that.



Understanding Labor Pain

Gate theory: matching the pain

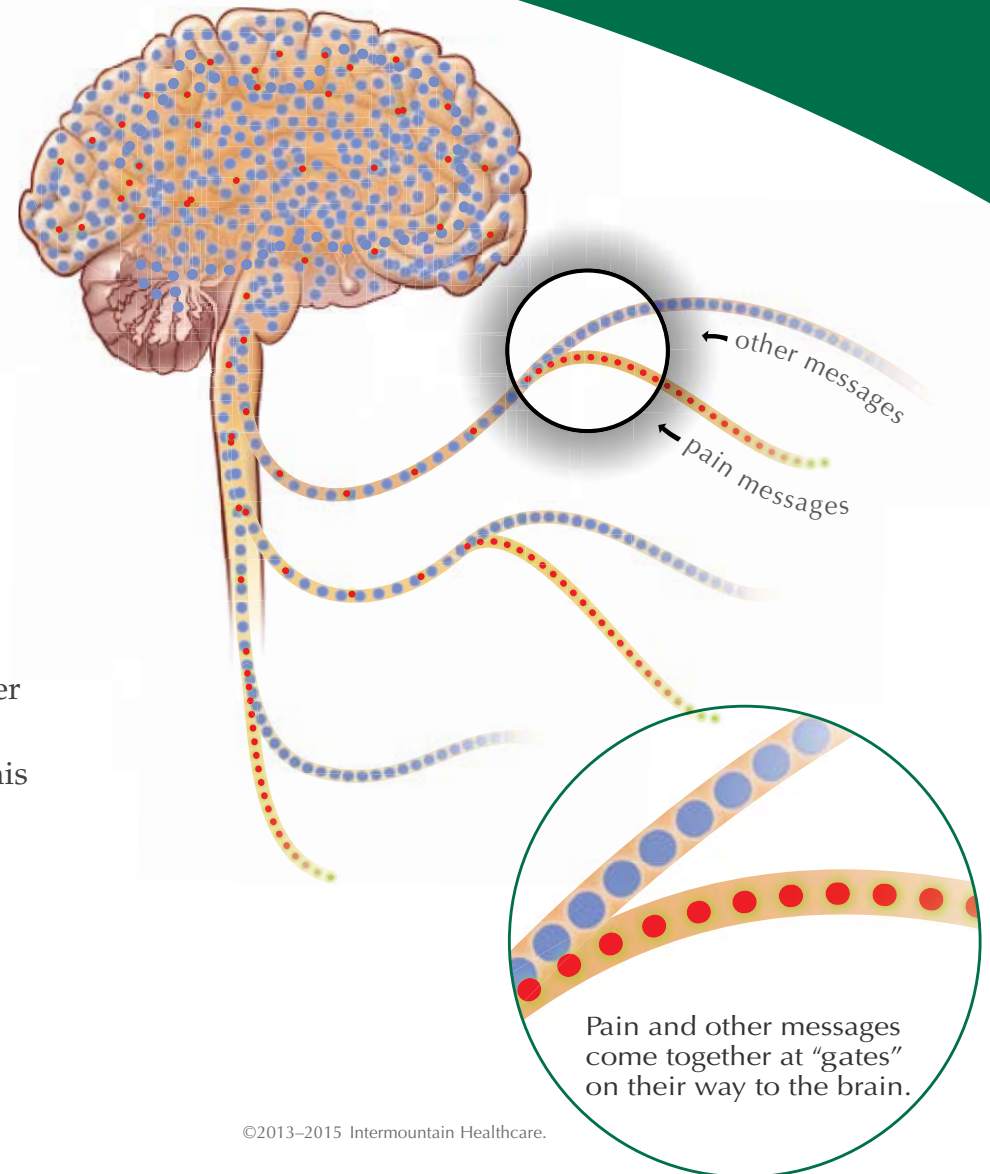
Pain messages pass through nerve “gates” to reach the brain. You can **close these gates and block the brain’s sense of pain.**

Why:

Your brain can only register so many messages at the same time. So if you provide extra messages — if you match the pain with something else — you can crowd the nerve gates. In this way, you can close the gates and alter your perception of pain.

How:

The activities in these Labor Support Cards help you focus on other messages. They can flood your imagination and your senses — stimulating your sense of touch, taste, hearing, smell and sight. This can lessen your pain and ease your labor.



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Positions & Movements

The walkabout

Walking is a gentle, upright activity that can help your labor.

Why:

Walking can be very useful during the first stage of labor. It keeps your pelvis moving to help the baby find the best way through. If your labor is slow to start or progress, walking can help establish a good pattern of contractions.

How:

- **Walk slowly with your partner, in a relaxed way.** During contractions, stop and lean on a support, swaying your hips.
- **During hard labor, you may need a lot of support to walk between contractions.** You may need your partner to support your entire weight.



Positions & Movements

The labor dance

Slow dancing helps the pelvis move.

Why:

Upright positions — like walking and dancing — use gravity to increase the work of contractions. By moving the pelvis, the labor dance encourages your baby to move deeper into your pelvis. The labor dance can be very relaxing (especially with music) and lets your labor support partner reach your back for soothing pressure or massage.

How:

- **Stand up, facing your labor support partner.** Put your arms around your partner's shoulders and neck. Rest your head on your partner's chest or shoulder. Your partner's arms go around your sides, hands clasped at your back.
- **Sway together like you're slow dancing.** Try moving to music with different speeds and rhythms.
- **For deeper relaxation,** have your partner massage your back or talk softly into your ear.



Positions & Movements

The dangle

The dangle is an upright, supported squat. It lets your labor partner support you without risking a back injury.

Why:

The dangle helps to widen the outlet of the pelvis, while allowing you to move your hips freely. It also stretches your torso slightly. These adjustments can help the baby move into the best position for birth.

The dangle may be especially helpful if you have a backache, as a change in the baby's position may relieve the backache.

How:

- **Have your partner sit on a counter or bed**, feet supported on two chairs. Next, position yourself between your partner's legs with your back facing your partner.
- **Drape your arms over your partner's thighs.** Lower yourself into a squatting position, weight supported by your arms and your partner's thighs.
- **Breathe and relax into this gentle stretch.**



Positions & Movements

The lift

The lift is an upright technique you can use during contractions.

Why:

The lift can help a baby move out of a posterior position. (“Posterior” means that the back of your baby’s head is against the back of your pelvis — a position that can cause more painful “back labor.”) Lifting the baby up and out of the pelvis during a contraction may help your baby rotate into the preferred anterior position.

How:

- **Stand with your back to your labor partner.** Your partner’s arms should be around your belly, with hands meeting under your belly.
- **As a contraction starts, your partner should lift your belly up.** You can also use your own hands to help lift baby and belly during a contraction.
- **In between contractions, walk around.**



Positions & Movements

Leaning positions

Leaning positions relieve pressure on the pelvic floor (the muscles and tissues that support your uterus and bladder). You can try a leaning position while you're standing, kneeling or sitting.

Why:

A leaning position may create more space and freedom for your baby to change positions in your pelvis. It may also give you a chance to rest during labor.

How:

In all these positions, feel free to rock your pelvis back and forth:

- **Standing.** Straddle a chair and lean on the back of the chair. Lean over the front of a couch.
- **Sitting.** Sit on the edge of the bed and lean forward holding on to your support person.
- **Kneeling.** Kneel and lean over the raised head of the bed. Kneel over a pillow with your bottom up. Kneel and lean over a birthing ball.



Positions & Movements

Sitting positions

Sitting positions let gravity work while allowing you to rest during labor.

Why:

A sitting position helps you relax and conserve energy. Try it if you're tired or having difficulty releasing tension, but don't want to lie down. Sitting on a toilet may help you relax the perineum (the area around your vagina) for pushing and put you in the right frame of mind to "let go."

How:

- **On the bed.** Raise the head of the bed. Recline with your arms and back supported by pillows. If you like, raise the foot of the bed, so you can support your lower body with your feet on the bed.
- **On the chair.** Lean forward and get support from your labor partner during contractions. Sit backward and lean over the back of the chair. Your partner can rub your lower back. Sitting forward or backward, try putting your feet up on a step-stool or other footrest. This helps widen the pelvic outlet even more.



Positions & Movements

Reclining

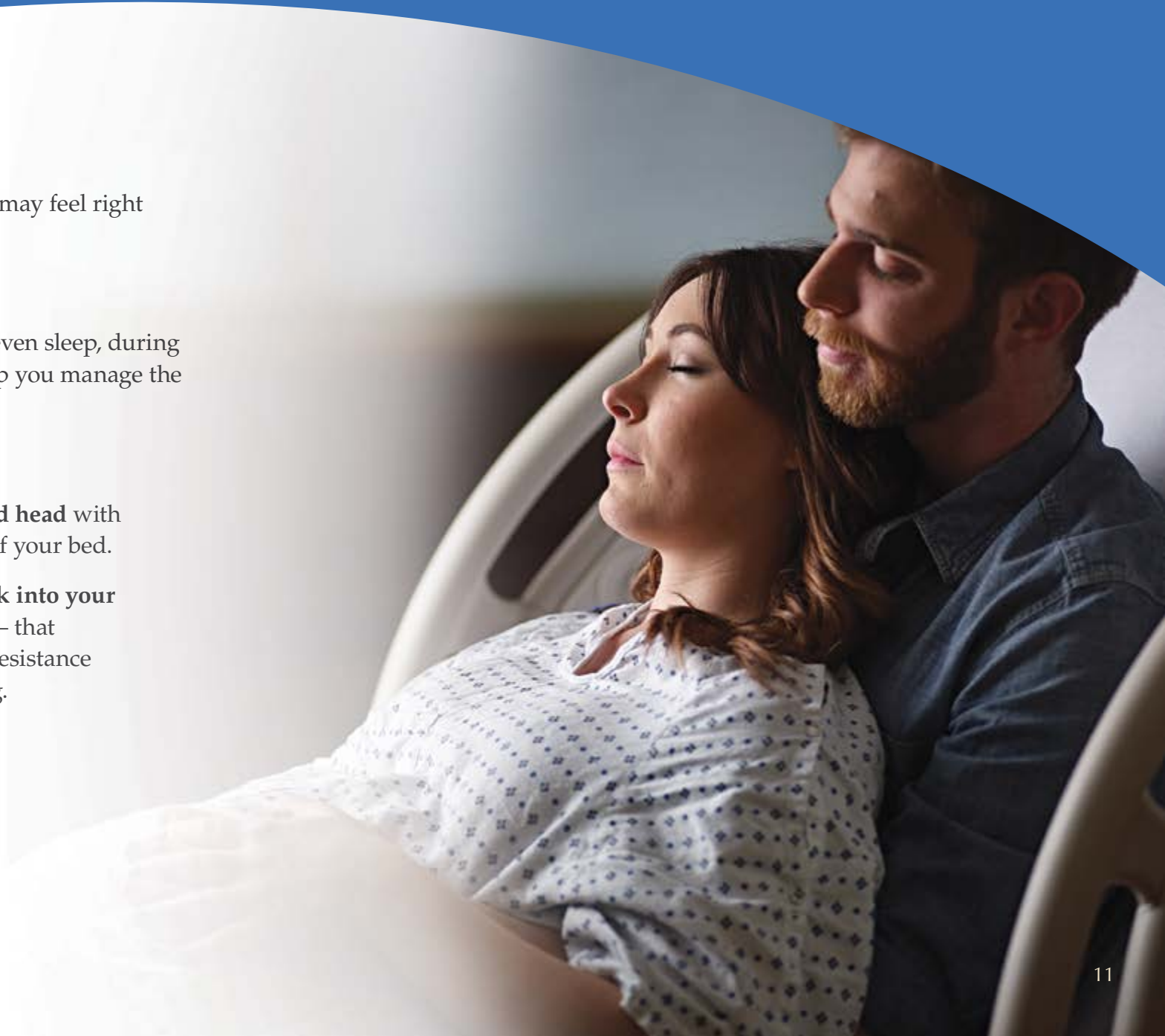
Reclining (leaning back) in bed may feel right during labor.

Why:

Reclining can help you rest, or even sleep, during labor. This position can also help you manage the intensity of a fast labor.

How:

- **Support your back, neck, and head** with pillows and the raised head of your bed.
- **You can also try leaning back into your partner sitting behind you** — that combination of support and resistance may feel good and reassuring.



Positions & Movements

Side-lying

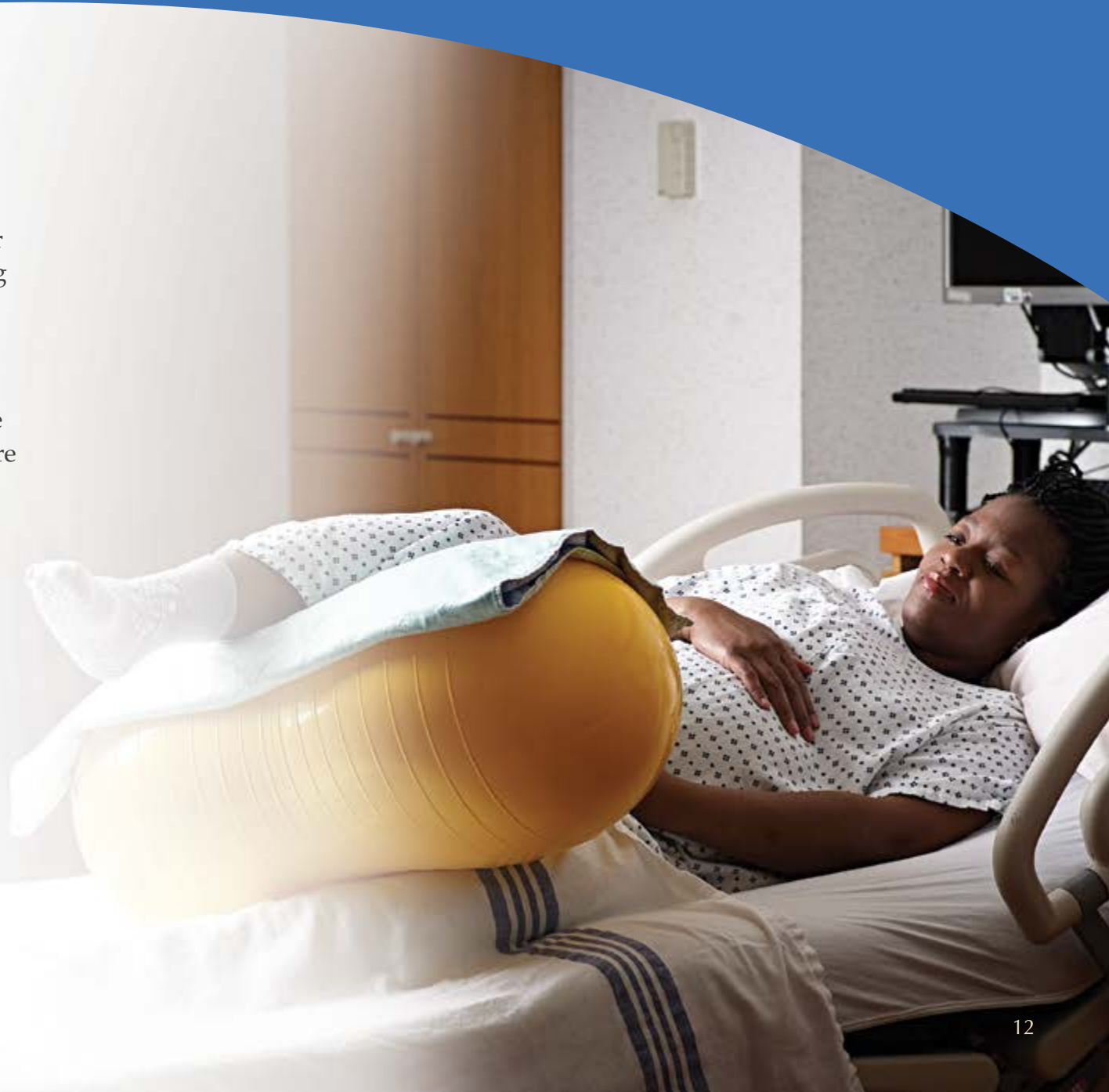
During labor you may want to rest on your side, with your body in your usual sleeping position.

Why:

Side-lying can help if you're having trouble relaxing or managing pain. It takes pressure off your muscles and organs and lets your uterus come forward easily during contractions. Side-lying may be especially useful later in labor, if you find yourself getting exhausted.

How:

- **Lying on your side, use pillows** to support your arms, legs, and head.
- **Experiment to find a position that feels comfortable** and allows you to relax deeply.



Positions & Movements

Freedom positions

A freedom position is any position that helps widen the pelvis. Freedom positions include lunging and squatting.

Why:

Freedom positions may help to speed labor. They change the shape of the pelvic opening and use gravity to help the baby move down the birth canal. (Note that you should only use the squatting position during the second stage of labor, after you feel the urge to push.)

Freedom positions also give you a chance to stretch tired leg muscles.

How:

- **Lunge.** Use during any stage of labor. Stand or kneel with one leg raised on a chair or stool. For balance, you can hold onto something or someone as you lunge.
- **Squat.** Use only during the second stage of labor, when you have the urge to push. Hold onto a bar or other support during a contraction. You may want to move out of a squat in between contractions.



Positions & Movements

Hands and knees

This is an “on all fours” position, but you can use it with a birthing ball or chair for more support.

Why:

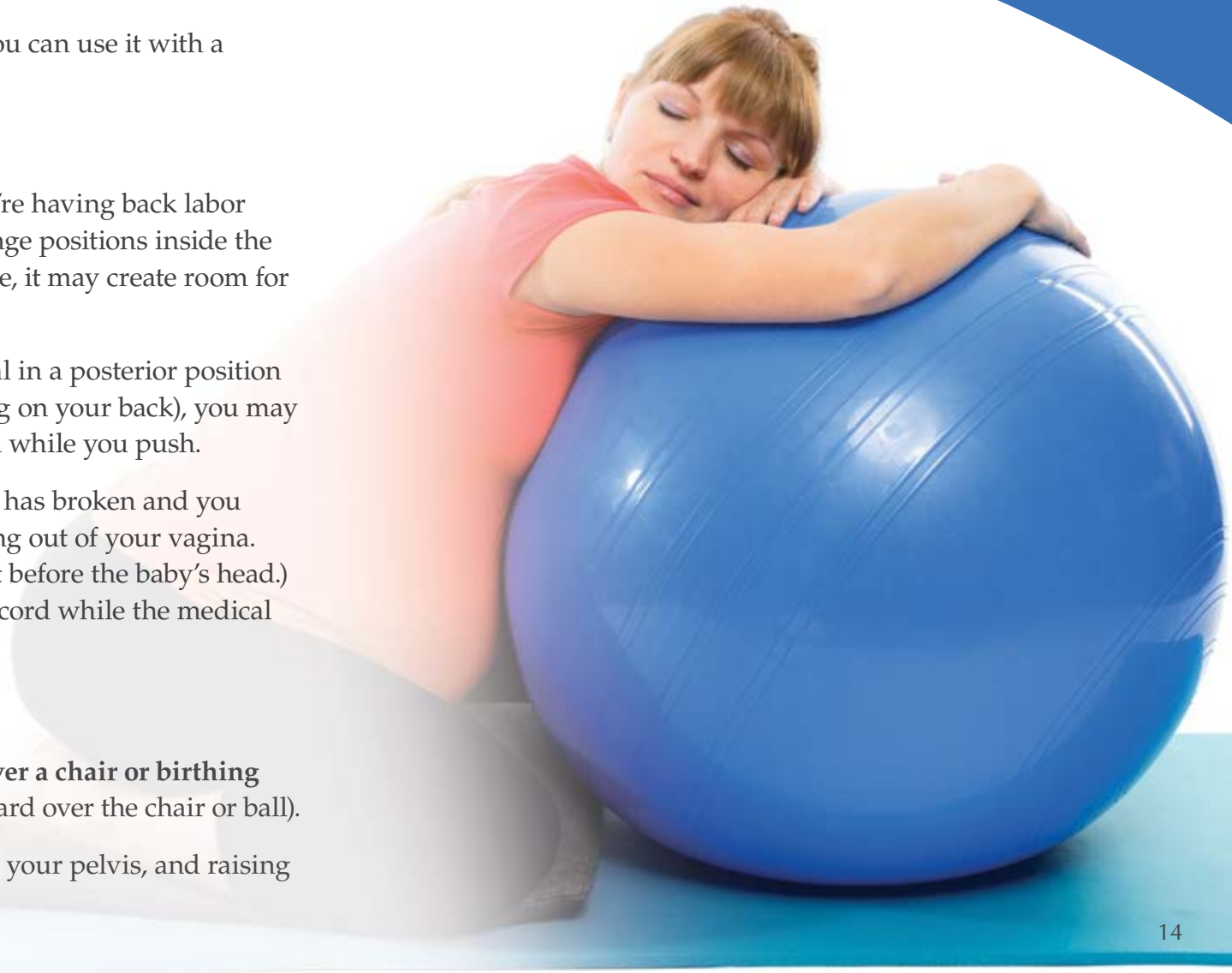
This position is especially useful if you’re having back labor or want to encourage your baby to change positions inside the uterus. By relieving downward pressure, it may create room for your baby to rotate.

If your baby is already in the birth canal in a posterior position (the back of your baby’s head is pressing on your back), you may want to use a hands and knees position while you push.

This position is also good if your water has broken and you have the sensation of something hanging out of your vagina. (The umbilical cord may have come out before the baby’s head.) This position will ease pressure on the cord while the medical team investigates.

How:

- **Get on hands and knees, or kneel over a chair or birthing ball** (keeping your body weight forward over the chair or ball).
- **Experiment** with rocking or rotating your pelvis, and raising or lowering your hips and bottom.



Positions & Movements

In water

During labor, getting in a shower can be a form of therapy (“hydrotherapy”).

Why:

Warm water can ease muscle tension and help you relax. Some studies show that it helps labor progress.

How:

Hydrotherapy is best used later in labor, when your cervix is at least 3 centimeters dilated and your contractions are strong and regular.

- **In the shower, direct the spray of water to any area that feels especially sore** (your lower back, for example). Imagine the water rinsing away stress and tension.



Breathing, Vocalizing & Relaxing

Breathing techniques

These techniques encourage deep, rhythmic breathing during labor.

Why:

- Holding your breath is a common response to labor pain. Unfortunately, it just makes you feel worse. It tires you out, tightens you up, and may make your labor slower and more difficult.
- By contrast, breathing deeply relaxes your body and helps you release the tension that can build up during labor. It can calm you and help you “go with the flow” of your labor.

How:

- **Abdominal breathing.** Put one hand on your chest, the other on your abdomen. Breathe in, noticing the hand on your abdomen rise (imagine a balloon in your belly). Let the air out and see the hand fall.
- **Rhythmic breathing.** Breathe slowly and deeply in through your nose, out through your mouth. Make breaths in and breaths out equally slow and deep.
- **Adding counts and mantras.** Have your labor partner count to help slow and deepen your breathing — three or four counts in, three or four counts out. Or, use on a positive word or phrase to create a helpful rhythm: “Re...lax, let...go, open...up.”



Breathing, Vocalizing & Relaxing

Vocalizing

Vocalizing just means making sounds with your voice and breath. It can include moans, groans, hums, songs, sighs and chants.

Why:

It's natural to vocalize during labor. Many women find it helpful and empowering. Low, deep sounds are best. They help relax your body and focus your energy. (On the other hand, high-pitched sounds can make you feel out of control and frightened.)

How:

- **From the chest, relaxed.** Whatever sound you want to make — a moan, a groan, a hum — let it come from your chest, not your throat. Consciously relax your mouth, jaw, and throat. Drop your shoulders. Let the deep sound flow out — don't force it.
- **Getting started.** If you feel self-conscious, have your labor partner start first. Your partner can make a low-tone sound near your cheek and face. It could be a song, a chant of your baby's name — whatever. You may soon find yourself joining in.
- **Mixing it up.** Try vocalizing when you're doing breathing or visualization exercises.



Breathing, Vocalizing & Relaxing

Muscle relaxation

Muscle relaxation is both a mental exercise and a physical experience.

Why:

If you can consciously relax your voluntary muscle groups, you can help your labor progress with less tension, less fear, and less pain. You'll conserve your energy and help your mind stay clear.

How:

- With your body in a comfortable position, relax your body to a count of three. Let go more — relax more deeply — with each number you count. Do this repeatedly as you imagine tension melting from your body and mind.
- If one area of your body is more tense or painful, do the exercise above with that area as your focus. For example, instead of counting, you could say, "Relax lower back — relax. Relax lower back — relax."



Breathing, Vocalizing & Relaxing

Progressive muscle relaxation

This exercise can improve your focus and help relax your body.

Why:

The progressive relaxation exercise can help you stop “fighting” against the natural process of labor. Little by little, step by step, it can release tension in your mind and body.

How:

- As you take a deep breath in, tighten the muscles in your forehead as much as you can. Hold for three counts, then exhale and relax. Imagine all tension — physical and mental — draining away as you breathe out.
- Repeat the first step, moving slowly from head to toe, one area of your body at a time: eyes, mouth, jaw and cheeks, shoulders and neck, etc.
- If you like, ask your labor partner to lead you through this exercise. Your partner can add details to help you focus on getting the most from the exercise: “Your mouth is loose, your tongue at rest in the bottom of your mouth, your jaw easy and relaxed”..., etc.



Imagination & Perception

Mental relaxation

Mental relaxation is the state of calm, positive focus that helps you accept and manage the intensity of labor.

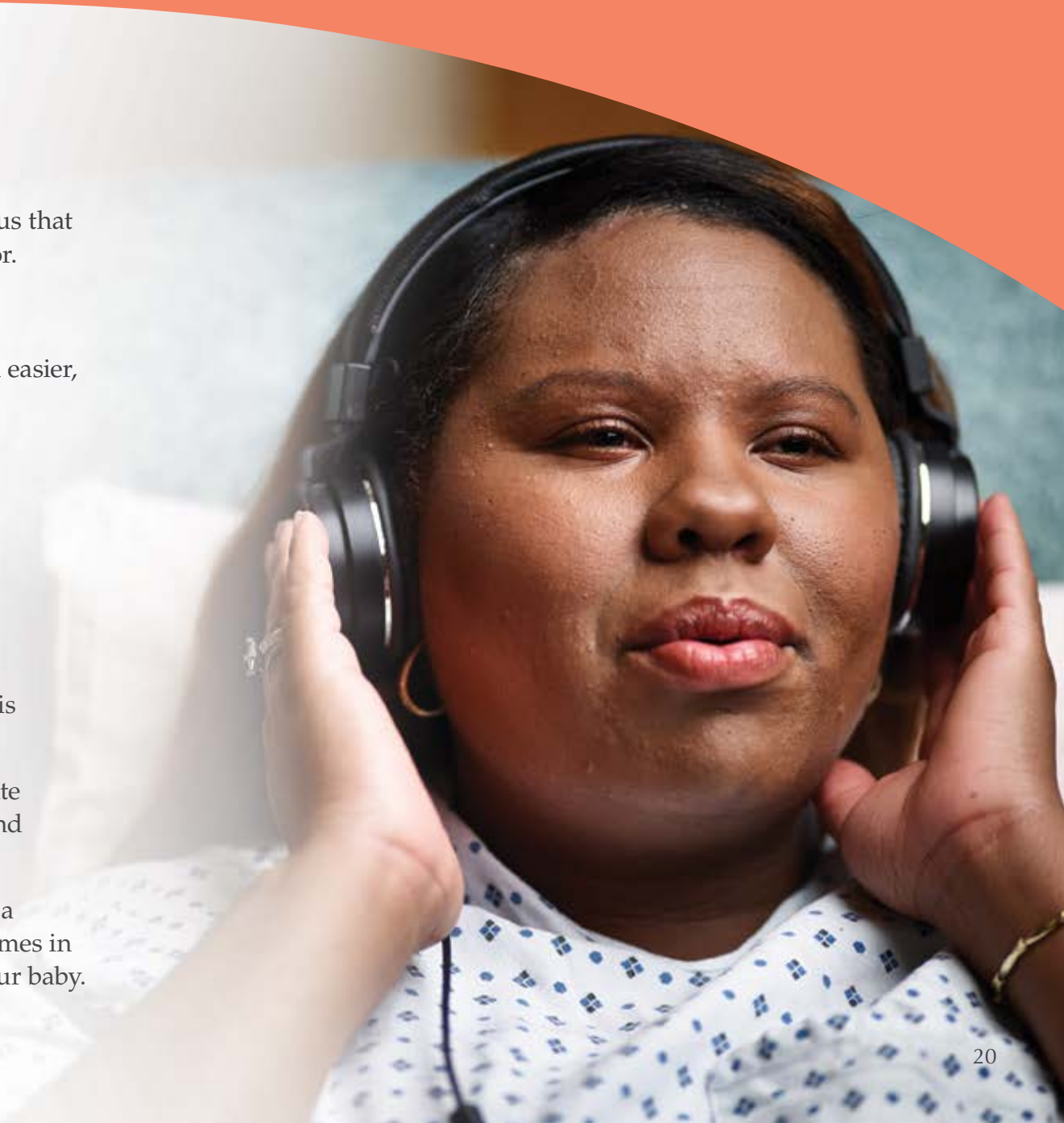
Why:

A relaxed mind leads to a relaxed body — and an easier, more positive birth experience.

How:

There's no right or wrong way to mentally relax. Experiment to find what works for you. Try these techniques:

- **Affirm.** Focus on a message that affirms your experience and your strength. "I am safe and my baby is safe." "My baby and I, we can do this together." "As I relax, my baby comes closer."
- **Go with the music.** Try listening to your favorite music. Sing along. Focus on the flow of notes and rhythms.
- **See the story.** Have your labor partner tell you a story about your family. Remember the good times in the past and imagine the happy future with your baby.



Imagination & Perception

More visualization prompts

You can visualize any image or scenario that you find engaging and pleasant.

Why:

Visualizations focus your mental and creative energies. They pull your attention away from any distress during labor.

How:

Try some of these scenarios combined with deep breathing exercises.

- **Experience a place.** See, feel, hear, taste and smell every aspect of a favorite place like a beach, forest, waterfall, meadow or lake.
- **Picture your breath.** “Breathe into the light...fill the area of discomfort with light and air.” “Open up as you breathe...open and open.” “Breathe in relaxation, breathe out discomfort.”
- **Re-imagine the contractions.** Feel the contractions like waves on the ocean...or your body hugging your baby. Picture the vertical muscles pulling up and back to open your cervix. See your body opening slowly like a flower.



Imagination & Perception

Breath awareness

This exercise combines visualization and deep breathing.

Why:

Your mind and body can work together to ease tension. This powerful combination may be very useful as your labor intensifies.

How:

As you do abdominal breathing, imagine a flower opening wider with each breath...or your pelvic bones floating apart...or waves rising and falling.

Observe in detail:

- How long does each breath in take? Each breath out?
- When does the breath start and stop?
- Is there any sound with the breath? (What sound do I want to go with that breath? Can I make that sound?)
- What happens during a contraction? Do I feel my lungs expanding as my uterus tightens? How does my breath feel in my abdomen and pelvis?



Imagination & Perception

Wave exercise

This exercise combines visualization and deep breathing.

Why:

This exercise is useful during contractions. It can help center and relax you — pulling the focus away from discomfort, toward a gentle and positive acceptance of the sensations of labor.

How:

- As you feel a contraction come on, continue deep breathing as you picture the contraction like a swelling wave.
- As the contraction builds, think of the movement of a wave. Note the curl and spill of the water on the top of the wave, the pull and shrug of water at the bottom. Observe the wave's beauty and power as you breathe slowly in and out.
- As the contraction begins to fade, think of the wave arriving on the shore, cleansing and renewing the sand. Imagine the breeze and the moisture. Try to hear the surf and to picture tension drifting away with the receding wave. Breathe out stress.



Touch & Massage

General tips for touch and massage

Touch and massage are often used to support women in labor.

Why:

Touch and massage may help ease tension and block pain. They can also help you feel supported, loved, and comforted.

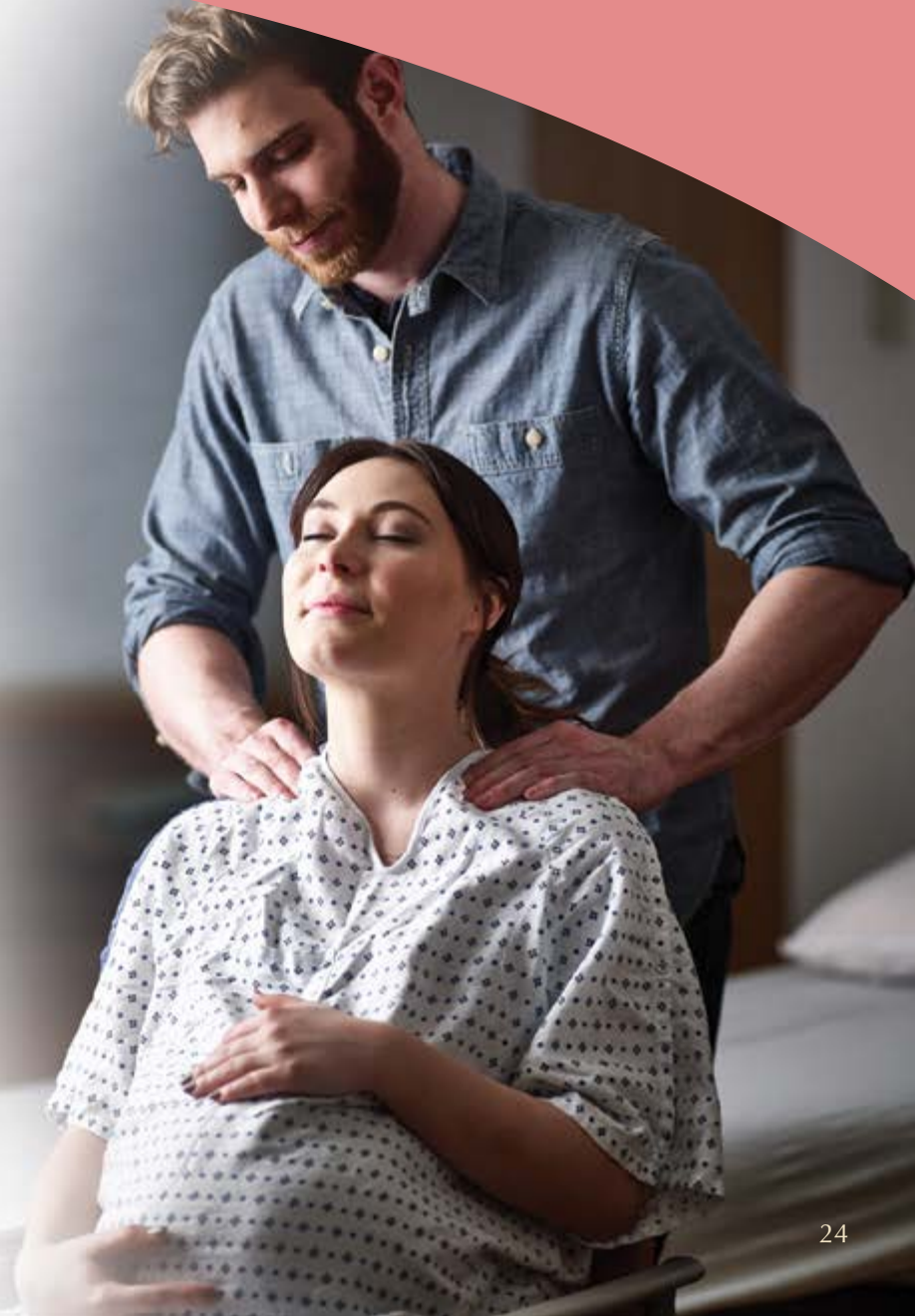
How:

You and your labor partner may have to experiment to find what feels good to you — every woman and every labor is different.

Some general tips for the labor partner:

- **Begin with gentle, smooth touch.** You can try a heavier, kneading touch if she asks for it.
- **Pay attention to areas that are often uncomfortable:** neck, shoulders, and back. Foot and leg massages are often welcome, too.
- **Experiment with positions.** For example, she can try lying on her side. This allows her to relax deeply and it gives you access to her back, neck and shoulders. Or, she can sit backwards on a chair (straddle), with a pillow to support her arms and head over the chair back.
- **If you want to try abdominal massage, keep it gentle.** Light, circular strokes feel best to many women.

Finally — remember that not every woman wants touch or massage during labor. If it isn't working, stay positive and move on.



Touch & Massage

Counter pressure

Counter pressure techniques apply steady firm pressure to a particular part of the body.

Why:

Counter pressure is helpful during contractions. It can help offset their intensity and slightly alter the shape of the pelvis. It also helps to stretch and ease ligaments, muscles, and joints.

How:

Try these counter pressure techniques:

- **Sacral pressure.** During a contraction, apply steady, gradual pressure to the sacrum (the bony area below the small of the back, above the buttocks). Try a slow circular motion from time to time.
- **Double hip-squeeze.** With your hands on either side of the woman's hips, press inward toward the pelvis during a contraction. Hold until the contraction eases, then slowly release.
- **Knee press.** With the woman sitting in bed with her legs bent up at the knee, push on her knees (aim to push her thighs back into her hips) during contractions.



Touch & Massage

Foot massage: stroking touches

This technique massages the feet and lower legs.

Why:

The feet are highly sensitive. Massage here can ease tension all over the body.

How:

Once the woman in labor is in a comfortable, relaxed position, try these techniques (if you have oil or lotion, put that on your hands first):

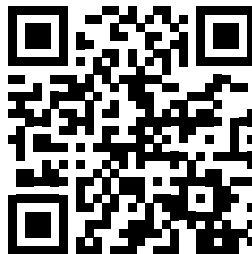
- Hold the heel of her foot in one hand. Use the other hand to stroke down the back of the leg to heel (the Achilles tendon). Do this several times.
- Stroke the bottom of the foot, from the heel to the arch and then to the ball of the foot. Do this several times.
- Pull gently on the toes, one-by-one, as if to lengthen them.
- Starting again near the knee, draw your fingers down the front of the leg (the shin) while steadying the foot with your other hand.
- Finally, sandwich the whole foot in your hand. Rub gently sideways and lengthwise to stroke the top and sides of the foot.



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