

The Best Positions

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For An Easier Labour

Over recent years there has been a return to the more instinctive “active” way of giving birth, and a move away from the medicalised approach to obstetrics which saw the labouring woman as something docile to be placed supine on a bed in a position convenient for the medical staff to go about their business, regardless of the unsuitability of labour on your back. This resurgent interest and appreciation of the advantages of being mobile and largely upright during labour has been popularized in the UK by figures such as Janet Balaskas, Sheila Kitzinger and Michel Odent.

In this article I describe the best positions to adopt during labour to increase the efficiency of the body's potential to deliver a baby with relative ease.

The positions take account of two main factors, key in helping the birth process:

1. The use of gravity to assist labour. Lying on your back during labour wastes the downward force of gravity, which is so useful in moving the baby through the birth canal. Hence, upright positions, with the body nearer vertical make birth easier and quicker.

2. The ability of the pelvis to tip forwards, lifting the sacrum and coccyx out of the way as the foetal head extends into the birth canal. This movement of the pelvis allows the space for the baby's head to be maximised. Conversely, lying on your back actually prevents the pelvis from opening fully.

Recommended Labouring positions

For those who know some yoga, it is a good idea to loosen up a bit in the early stages of labour by doing some simple gentle poses. Leave out reclining poses.

Wherever you have planned to deliver the baby, try and ensure there are plenty of big cushions and pillows. Having a sturdy chair and a bed around will also be an advantage.

Remember that it is important to follow your instincts as to what positions and activity you adopt during labour.

1. Walking and standing.

It is now well recognised that walking and standing shortens labours. This is often found to be particularly useful in the early part of the first stage of labour. You can lean forward against your partner (arms hanging around their neck) or a wall for support during contractions.

2. Squatting.

An excellent position for labour and birth. It allows the pelvis to fully open (when the squat is supported), and gravity to act on the downwards movement of the baby. The strength of contractions also increase in this position. Use someone to lean or hang onto, or lean onto a chair or bedside. A partner in this squat can also support you from behind under your arms.

Birthing pools are very useful in supporting this position, in or out. In the second stage as delivery approaches it is useful to try to use the supported squat, so that your hips are higher than your knees. (your bottom will be about 45 cm above the floor)

This allows full forward movement of the pelvis (Termed “the foetal ejection reflex” by Michel Odent), helping the baby to negotiate the birth canal.

3. Kneeling/All fours

These are very efficient postures for labour, allowing the body and pelvis to move quite freely with plenty of support to conserve energy. You will need something comfortable to kneel on and possibly against, such

as a chair, bedside or partner.

Posterior (back to back) labours are often more comfortable and efficient in these positions which can help the baby move into the normal “anterior” position. When labour is going too fast, adopting an all fours head down bottom in the air position can slow the labour by reducing gravity's effects.

4. Half kneel/half squat.

You need something to lean against. It can be useful to swap leg positions with each contraction. As with the other postures, it may feel more comfortable to rhythmically move the pelvis during contractions.

5. Lying on your side.

To get the benefits of gravity you need your upper body to be propped up with plenty of pillows. Whilst this position is not as effective as the more upright mobile positions, for some it can be a very useful way of getting some rest during a long tiring labour. If this is the position adopted during the second stage, the woman can draw her upper leg towards her (knee to chest), to help open her pelvis fully.

How to get more help and advice about birth positions.

Active Birth teachers are specially trained in teaching these positions to pregnant women in small classes. Many community Midwives are very knowledgeable about these birth postures.

NCT teachers also have a lot of expertise in birthing practise. Don't forget women you are close to who have had children, will have a wealth of first hand knowledge about birth posture.

How Osteopathy can help
Osteopaths who specifically work with pregnant women will assess the balance and mobility of the joints and soft tissues of the lumbar spine, abdomen and pelvis. Where problems are found that are likely to limit the normal movement and function of the pelvis during labour, treatment is used to correct and balance the tissues or joints. In this way the woman can ensure that she

approaches the birth with her body functioning as well as possible.

Previous articles published in ABC magazine are available to view under the “osteopaths and their specialisations” section of the website www.brightonosteopaths.co.uk and cover other areas relating to osteopathic treatment for pregnant women and babies.

References

Balaskas J, 1991 New Active Birth A concise guide to natural childbirth Thorsons

Sutton J & Scott P, 1995 Understanding and Teaching Optimal Foetal Positioning, Birth Concepts, New Zealand. (Available from NCT
Tel 0870 112 1120 @ £7.70

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