

Section 1. Basic Relaxation and Rhythmic Breathing

Slow breathing

Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth slowly, easily, and fully, making a sighing sound as you breathe out. Sigh away your tension. Most people find a rate between 5 and 12 breaths a minute to be comfortable. Breathing in through your nose keeps your mouth from getting too dry, but if your nose is congested, you'll need to breathe in through your mouth. Breathing out audibly through the mouth is easiest and most relaxing for most people. After practicing it in this way, if you still prefer exhaling through your nose, then do it the way you prefer. Don't rush the breathing or strain to fill up your lungs; just think, "easy in...easy out..." Think of each out-breath as a relaxing breath. You may find that in labor you vocalize or moan on the out-breath, and that is fine.

Roving Body Check with Slow Breathing

Try the Roving Body Check right along with my narration on the video. Tensing your muscles during labor leads to fatigue and increased pain. The Roving Body check is based on my observations that in labor tension often builds without the mother being aware. Seeking and releasing tension in one small area of your body after another works better than trying to relax your entire body all at once.

As you breathe in slowly, focus on a different body part (brow, jaw, neck, shoulders, right arm, left arm, low back, buttocks, right leg, left leg) with each breath and as you breathe out release any tension from that part.

This comes very naturally, because as you breathe in, tension in your chest and abdomen naturally builds, and is naturally released as you breathe out. Your partner can help you as follows:

1. While you breathe in slowly, your partner places one or both hands firmly (and comfortably) on the part for you to focus on, saying in a soothing tone of voice something like, "Is there any tension right here?"
2. While you breathe out, your partner gradually relaxes the pressure of his or her hands, saying, "Let it go." You "breathe out" your tension along with your breath.
3. Then during your next breath in, your partner's hands slide to and firmly touch the next body part and you repeat step 2.

You should give your partner feedback on how you want to be touched, the timing, and your partner's tone of voice. Some women prefer either touch or voice, but not both. A few want neither touch or voice, but still find it helpful to mentally "rove" through their own bodies, letting go of tension in a different part with each out-breath.

Light breathing

Practice this breathing along with the couple in the video. In labor you should save the light breathing for if and when you find slow breathing to be more difficult and not as helpful as it was earlier.

Breathe in and out through your mouth lightly and more quickly, at a rate of 30 to 60 breaths per minute. On the video the rate is about 50 to 60 breaths per minute. Try to keep your in-breaths silent and your out-breaths audible, and remain relaxed, especially your face, shoulders and back, while practicing this.

Your partner can help you keep a steady rhythm by matching or pacing your breathing with rhythmic hand movements (shown on the tape), head movements, or, if you prefer to close your eyes, by counting your breaths in rhythm, or stroking your arm or shoulder in the rhythm of your breathing. Also, if your partner notices any tension he or she can help you let go with reminders, touch, or massage.

This breathing rhythm pattern is trickier for most people to master than slow breathing. Give yourself some practice time to master it, and remember these tips:

- For a dry mouth, touch the tip of your tongue lightly to the roof of your mouth just behind your front teeth. Keep it there as you breathe.
- If you feel dizzy or light-headed while learning this breathing pattern, try to move less air by either slowing your breathing or breathing more shallowly. Also try to make sure your face and trunk are relaxed and that your in-breath is silent. The dizzy or light-headed feeling is caused by hyperventilation.

After mastering this pattern, it is very unlikely that you will hyperventilate in labor. *If you hyperventilate in labor, slow your breathing, and for a few contractions, place a paper bag over your nose and mouth (or borrow a surgical mask) and breathe with it on. You can always return to the slow breathing pattern in the rare event that the problem of hyperventilation persists.*

Positions in Labor

Changing positions and moving around in labor can help with pain and progress. Practice the breathing patterns in a variety of positions as the women on the video do, so that in labor it will feel natural and comfortable to do so. Sidelying, sitting, kneeling and leaning forward, rocking, walking, standing, and hands and knees are all good positions to use in labor.

Transition or variable breathing pattern

This pattern, sometimes called “pant-pant-blow” is really a combination of slow and light breathing: 3 or 4 light breaths are followed by a longer relaxing breath. Some women prefer to whisper “Hee-Hee-Hoo” as they do this pattern. Do this along with the class using the principles already described for slow and light breathing.