



## USING RELAX & BREATHE DURING LABOUR

Using your breathing is crucial during labour - not only to give you calm and focus but to provide you with energy and to give your body the hormones it needs to create effective contractions.

You can use your relaxation and breathing techniques whenever you need them and wherever you are.

## EARLY LABOUR...

Use your relax & breathe techniques when your contractions begin to intensify and they demand your focus and if you feel overwhelmed and a bit panicky.

If you can be distracted and you feel good, just breathe normally and use relax & breathe when you need it.







Early labour can be brief or it can last for a couple of days - try to potter on as normal until your contractions start to intensify and you need to focus on them.

If labour is taking a while to become established and your contractions are uncomfortable and stop/start, this can be frustrating and upsetting - try to accept your pattern of labour because your contractions could be moving your baby into a better position, rest as much as possible, eat and drink and use your breathing to stay as calm as possible and to relax your body.

If there is tension and panic, your contractions could be harder to work with and it may take longer for labour to get going.

## ESTABLISHED LABOUR...

When your contractions are powerful, focus on your breathing during a contraction to keep calm.

Relax your shoulders as you breathe out and focus on your breathing throughout each contraction.

And use your relax & breathe techniques if you feel overwhelmed or panicky - it will help to calm you, to help you refocus so you can say what you need and keep going.







Tiredness and pain can create tension - be aware of how tense you are and how rapid your breathing is. You may also be holding your breath with contractions.

Instead, focus on your breathing, slow it down to a more relaxed pace and try to let go of any tension - especially in your shoulders, your jaw, your arms and hands - and try to be as calm as possible.

It is also important to say what you need - do you need more information, reassurance or support? What pain relief are you using? Can something change so you feel more comfortable and calm?

# BIRTH...

Keep focusing on your breathing with each contraction, which may be a strong urge to push.

Try not to hold your breath for longer than a few seconds, keep breathing in and out slowly.

As your baby is being born, slow your breathing and imagine you are blowing out birthday candles with slow and gentle out-breaths until your baby is born. Focus on your breathing to stay as calm as possible.

Be guided by your body and push as you need to, but don't hold your breath for too long.

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Keep focusing on your breathing as you give birth to your baby. The images on TV are often of women holding their breath and going red in the face as they push - the evidence tells us this isn't very effective and it's better to keep the flow of oxygen going by being upright and by limiting the time you hold your breath as you push.

Keep the pace of your breathing slow and steady - deep in-breath and then a long, gentle out-breath. Try to be guided by your body and do what feels right, rather than what you think you should do as this is probably based on TV births which may not be accurate.

Some women can feel quite panicky, especially as baby's head is crowning - use your breathing to be calm, let that be your focus to prevent panic from taking over because your baby is almost here.

# CONTRACTIONS

As you feel each contraction build, turn your focus to your breathing.

Breathe in, slowly and deeply, and then focus on a long, gentle out-breath, relaxing your shoulders, jaw, arms, hands and your pelvic floor.

Take each contraction at a time and rest in-between each one.

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The key to working with your contractions is to slow your breathing and to let that be your focus as you breathe through each one. Some simple techniques can also be helpful:

- Thinking CALM with your in-breath and RELAX with your out-breath (or using your own words)
- Counting through your breathing - finding your own pattern of counting
- Imagining blowing out bubbles with your out-breath
- Relaxing your body with every out-breath
- Taking your thoughts to a safe/happy place when you need to be calm

Your practice during pregnancy can help you find what works best for you.

## GOING TO HOSPITAL

Your contractions are most probably strong and regular - find the most comfortable position for you in the car and focus on your breathing with each contraction.

It is important to stay as calm as possible - it can help to listen to relaxation music in headphones, to close your eyes, to just focus on your breathing and work with your contractions.

Let your partner work on getting you to the hospital, you need to focus on staying calm.

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## BEFORE A CAESAREAN

You might be having a planned caesarean or a decision may have just been taken to have one and you may be experiencing a range of emotions.

If you are feeling nervous, anxious or panicky, focus on your breathing to slow it down and to help you to stay calm. Then think about what you need to feel less anxious - information, reassurance, to know more about what your caesarean will involve.

A pregnant woman is shown from the waist up, holding a light blue baby onesie with both hands. She is standing over an open white suitcase with a black interior. The background is softly blurred, showing what appears to be a hospital or clinical setting. In the top right corner, there is a white circular logo with the name 'Janine Smith' written in a cursive script.

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## DURING A CAESAREAN

If you need to stay calm, focus on your breathing.

You may be distracted by the caesarean preparation but use your breathing if you start to become tense or panicky.

When you are in the operating theatre, it is normal to feel nervous - ask questions so you know what is happening and continue to use your breathing to stay calm. Relax your jaw, your shoulders, arms and hands.



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## BEING INDUCED

Being able to relax, breathe and be calm is essential with induction - there can be a lot going on, especially if you are on a shared induction ward.

Use your relax & breathe techniques for focus, for calm and to be comfortable. It can also help to listen to music, maybe through headphones, to use your birth ball and to work with your contractions.

Ask questions so you know what is happening and say what you need to be more informed, reassured and supported.







There can be a lot of waiting around with induction so you need to relax, keep distracted, go for a wander, eat, drink and rest. Use your breathing if you get frustrated or if you are uncomfortable but you may not need to use your relax & breathe techniques until your contractions begin.

If your labour is being induced with the oxytocin drip, it is still important to be as calm and relaxed as possible - gravity will help with positioning your baby and with your comfort and being calm and without tension will help your body to produce its own oxytocin, which will help to create effective contractions as well as boosting your endorphin production.



## IF YOUR OPTIONS CHANGE

Labour can be unpredictable and different monitoring or interventions can become necessary.

It can be useful to ask questions to gather information, to know more about your options and to say what you need. This can help you to refocus and adapt to a different labour.

Use your breathing and relax your body to let go of any tension - this can help you to stay calm, to think clearly and to communicate better.

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## IF YOU ARE TIRED

If labour lasts for several hours, it is normal to feel tired so it is important to try to rest in-between your contractions.

Find comfortable positions to work with your contractions and then to rest - it can help to be able to kneel or sit, resting your arms and head during the pauses between contractions.

Carrying tension is also exhausting, so using your breathing to be as calm and relaxed as possible could help to give you more energy.

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# OVERWHELMED OR SCARED

It is normal to feel overwhelmed at times during labour and birth. You may notice more tension in your body, your breathing may be fast and shallow and you might be feeling a bit panicky.

See if you can get back control of your breathing - slow it down, relax your muscles and let your breathing be your focus. As your breathing slows, your heart rate will slow down and your body should start to relax.

Say what you need to feel less overwhelmed - information, support and reassurance can make a big difference.

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# Bubble Breathing

\*Breathe in through your nose if you can. And then breathe out through your mouth.

\*Breathe in deeply - don't force it - and breathe out gently, relaxing your body.

\*Relax your forehead and your jaw, loosen your shoulders, uncurl your fingers and allow your legs and feet to be still.

\*As you breathe out, imagine you are making a stream of bubbles - this helps to create a long, gentle out-breath.

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# Counting

\*As you use your Relax & Breathe techniques, counting can be beneficial for some people.

You can try:

\*breathing in (count 1), breathing out (count 2)

Up to 10 and then repeat

\*Count gently through your in-breath and again through your out-breath

Practise and see if you can make it work for you.





## Calm/Relax

\*Breathe in through your nose if you can. And breathe out through your mouth.

\*Breathe in as deeply as you can - don't force it - and breathe out gently, relaxing your body.

\*Relax your forehead and your jaw, loosen your shoulders, uncurl your fingers and allow your legs and feet to be still.

\*It can be helpful to think the word CALM as you breathe in and RELAX as you breathe out.

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## Positions & Movement

Gravity and movement can help you be as comfortable as possible with and in-between contractions.

Try to be guided by your body and go with what feels right for you.

Even if you need to be on a bed, due to an epidural, you can still have some gravity by sitting up and kneeling/leaning forwards.



It can also help to consider your birth space, does something need to change to help you feel more comfortable, relaxed and supported?



Is it too bright? Can the lights be dimmed?

Are you warm enough?

Are you drinking enough water? Do you need the loo?

Do you feel safe enough? What do you need?

Are there too many people in the room? Is there too much noise?

Do you need more privacy?

If you are unable to settle, something may need to change?

Say what you need

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If you are feeling unsure, overwhelmed, upset, frustrated and tired use your breathing to keep calm and to manage or head off any panic or anxiety.

It is crucial to say what you need, to ask for information, support and reassurance if you need it and to put those needs first.





Relax & Breathe was developed 10 years ago to work with pain & discomfort and to work with anxiety and panic.

I have shared this with hundreds of parents, as a doula I have used it during births, I have taught it to parents, to teenagers and I have used it myself to stay calm.

Its effectiveness and simplicity means it can be used by everyone.

Janine Smith

A specialist in pregnancy, birth and parent wellbeing