



PREPARING FOR CHILDBIRTH

Breathing for Labor and Birth

Breathing rhythmically in a pattern is used during labor and birth to enhance relaxation and relieve pain. There are two basic patterns of breathing for labor: slow breathing and light breathing. The pattern you use depends on the nature and intensity of your contractions, your preferences, and your need for oxygen. By practicing a variety of breathing patterns before labor, you can use them and adapt them as necessary to help calm and relax yourself during labor.

Guidelines

1. Begin using patterned breathing when you can no longer walk through or talk through a contraction without having to pause.
2. Whatever your position, be as comfortable and relaxed as possible.
3. Breathe in and out equally, at a rate comfortable for you.
4. Start with slow breathing and change as needed.

Relaxation Response

Organizing (relaxing) breath, focus, patterned breathing, comfort measures, organizing breath.

Breathing Patterns – First Stage

Organizing Breath – Signals beginning and end of contraction. Inhale deeply, sighing audibly on exhale.

Slow – Inhale quietly through nose (or mouth) and exhale audible through mouth (or nose). Release tension on exhale, pause, and inhale again. 1 breath every 6-10 seconds.

Light – Inhale quickly through mouth and exhale audibly through mouth. Release tension on exhale, keep breathing shallow and light. 1 breath every 1-2 seconds.

Adaptations

- Contraction Tailored – begin slowly, light breathing at peak, end slowly
- Vocal – make sounds or words on exhalation
- Slide – slow inhalation, exhale in 3-4 “puffs”
- Variable – several light breaths followed by longer, slower exhalation

Breathing Patterns – Second Stage

Urge to Push – Ask to be checked for dilation. Premature urge: Lift chin and arch back. Breathe deeply in and out or blow lightly until urge passes.

Spontaneous Bearing Down – Take organizing breath, release tension, focus on baby. Bear down while holding breath or slowly releasing breath, relax pelvic floor muscles. After 5-7 seconds, breathe until urge to push comes again and bear down. Organizing breath after contraction and relax.

Directed Pushing – Take one or more organizing breaths, inhale and hold, bear down 5-7 seconds, relax pelvic floor muscles. Release breath, take a few breaths and repeat until contraction subsides. Take organizing breath and relax.

Prolonged Pushing – Hold breath while bearing down for 10 seconds or more. Use only with guidance of caregiver.

Suggested Practice Sequence

1. Conditioning exercises
2. Comfort measures for pregnancy
3. Body awareness exercises
4. Passive relaxation
5. Relaxation countdown
6. Perineal massage
7. Slow breathing
8. Touch relaxation
9. Roving body check
10. Slow breathing and roving body check
11. Attention focusing
12. First stage positions with slow breathing
13. Light breathing
14. Adaptations of slow and light breathing
15. Variety of positions with adaptations of slow and light breathing
16. Techniques for back pain combined with breathing patterns
17. Panting to avoid pushing
18. Expulsion breathing
 - Spontaneous bearing down
 - Directed pushing
19. Second stage positions
20. Labor rehearsal: practice all techniques during a series of contractions