

Improving your chance of a natural birth in the hospital

During pregnancy

1. **Find a provider and a birth place who are supportive of your birth wishes.** Ask a lot of questions; including how supportive they are of use different positions and comfort measures during labor & birth, and their rates of epidurals, inductions, and Cesareans. Tour the birthplace and ask about standard practices and intervention rates. If you don't feel your provider - or the hospital - is a good fit, or if they're not responsive and considerate of your views, interview someone else. Midwives and family practice doctors tend to be less interventionist than OBs, but it depends on the provider.
2. **Take care of your health.** Proper diet and daily exercise, routine prenatal care, and management of any chronic conditions will help you stay healthy throughout your pregnancy, make your labor easier, and support you during recovery.
3. **Take a childbirth class with your partner.** A good childbirth class should emphasize informed choice and self-help methods to relieve pain and aid progress. A class should include group and couple activities, videos, handouts, and visual aids. Newborn care may and breastfeeding may be included or may be offered in a separate class.
4. **Address your fears.** Put a name to them. Figure out how big they are for you, and how likely they are in reality. Discuss any fears, emotional concerns, past injuries or emotional trauma with your birth team. If appropriate, seek counseling before birth.
5. **Talk with your provider and your partner/support person about your expectations, your values, and any “what ifs” that pertain to you.** Go beyond the birth plan worksheets and think about your vision for the birth, your values, your personal history, and any fears or concerns. It's important they your care team understand what is important to you and what is challenging. Review your birth plan with all the people on your birth team, including your provider.
6. **Hire a doula.** Research shows that the continuous support of a birth doula during labor reduces Cesareans and other interventions and increase parents' satisfaction with their experience. Doulas are trained labor support professionals. A doula will help you prepare for birth, provide emotional and physical support for you and your partner during labor, facilitate informed decision making, and follow up after birth to support you adjustment to life with a newborn. If you plan to have loved ones supporting you, “The Birth Partner Handbook” is a good resource for your support people.
7. **Wait for labor to start naturally - avoid elective induction.** Inducing can be a protracted process, and is more likely to lead to other interventions and cesarean section. Electively induced babies are more likely to be low birth weight and have immature respiratory systems. There is a recent trend toward recommending elective induction between 39 and 41 weeks. Be prepared to discuss induction with your provider.

During labor

8. **Take a 'snow day' during early labor.** Giving birth is hard work, and it can take hours or days. Early labor is a quiet, at home time. Alternate rest and activity. Light activities – short walks, light housework, preparing postpartum freezer meals, trying the movements you learned in childbirth class – can help your labor move along. However, don't tire yourself. You need your strength for birth and postpartum! Relax, eat healthy food, hydrate, and sleep at night. Your labor will let you know when it's time to go!
9. **Minimize vaginal exams and continuous monitoring.** There are times when these procedures are necessary, but often they are merely routine. Both assessment inhibit mom's movement and discomfort and increase the possibility of interventions. Experienced care providers can usually evaluate how a woman is progressing based on her behavior. Your provider may recommend continuous monitoring at any point if there are concerns about baby.
10. **Stay mobile.** Movement helps baby descend, and helps you manage pain. Get a birth ball for your room, and experiment with adjusting the bed to support different positions. Change positions every 30 minutes or so – try the shower, sit on the birth ball, hang from the squat bar, and lie on your side when you need a rest. Practice labor positions for pushing before birth with your support team. Your doula can suggest positions, even if you have an epidural.
11. **Trust your body.** This may be your first baby, but labor is a completely normal, healthy, physiological process. It is also largely an autonomous process, meaning it can happen without mom's conscious involvement – though you can help it along! If a laboring mom is in a safe place, she will naturally adopt movements and breath patterns that facilitate the baby's descent. She will also rest between contractions. If you're trying something and it's not working, change it – ask for help if you need more support or suggestions. Being familiar with the normal labor will help alleviate fear. "Ina May's Guide to Childbirth" is a great resource for reading about the experience of birth.
12. **If interventions are suggested, ask questions.** Empower your support people to help you in this. You have choices, and you have the authority to consent or to withhold consent. Ask about what the procedure is, how it's conducted, why it's done, any risks (short and long term), alternatives, if it could be delayed, how reliable the indicators for this intervention are, how common it is, how likely it is to be successful, and what the next steps would be.
13. **Know that you are a beautiful and amazing momma, right now.** You already love this child, and you are already taking care of him. You are going to do this birth thing together and you're going to be awesome.

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