

Breathing for Labour

The only breathing you will need to do during most of your labour is a natural extension of normal breathing. Slow, deliberate and steady breaths throughout each contraction ensure that you and your baby receive the necessary oxygen. Four to five breaths (seven seconds for each inhalation and exhalation) is an average number per contraction. The most important thing is to keep oxygen moving through you.

As labour progresses and the contractions require more of your attention you will naturally adjust your breathing. You may begin to breathe faster and shallower. It is important to keep your breathing as slow and even as possible to avoid hyperventilation. It is also useful to greet and release each contraction with a deep breath and then resume normal breathing. This is helpful to let your partner and support people when the contractions begin and end. Welcome the deep rest that is possible between contractions.

Vocalization during active labour is a natural extension of breathing and serves to release tension caused by pain. You can use the sound of your breath as a focal point to help you during contractions and to ensure that you are not holding your breath. Many people cease breathing as an instinctive response to pain. You can overcome this response simply by listening to your breathing sounds throughout each contraction. Some women hold their breath to avoid making noise or try to hide their response to pain. This may be because they are conditioned not to express themselves, or they are trying to avoid upsetting others. This is not a useful coping mechanism. It is very important to keep breathing throughout each contraction. Let whatever needs to come out, come out. Remember this is your labour. Do what works for you and let others take care of themselves.

Focus on achieving as much relaxation as possible. Think about yielding to and releasing the pain. Do not worry if you are not totally relaxed during the peak of a contraction. Often moving and rocking during contractions can be helpful in moving through the contractions. Some women think of it as a labour dance.