



Mothers-to-be dream of a calm, drug-free birth – but the reality of labour can be quite different. Jane Carstens talks to experts about natural pain relief.

Special delivery

Acupuncture

“Acupuncture reduces the severity of labour pains and assists with muscle relaxation by helping the body release natural endorphins and other beneficial chemicals,” says Dr Bill Meyers, president of Australian Medical Acupuncture College (AMAC). “It works best when women are treated during the course of their pregnancy. There isn’t a one-size-fits-all approach with acupuncture, because every woman is different. Low power laser is also available for women who are ‘needle shy.’”

Contact: Australian Medical Acupuncture College (AMAC) www.amac.org.au

Hypnobirthing

Melissa Spilsted, director of Hypnobirthing Australia, admits the ‘hypno’ part of hypnobirthing might confuse people or even put them off. “Hypnobirthing basically prepares the mind and body for a positive birth experience,” she explains. “It gives women the tools to stay calm and focused and have a positive birth experience, even as the intensity of labour increases. Other benefits include giving women knowledge about their body and how it can cope with childbirth, the importance of support to help them stay calm, and how to stay relaxed during even the most intense labour contractions. Our subconscious is where fears are held, so hypnobirthing works by reconditioning the mind to prepare for a

positive birth experience, therefore avoiding the release of stressor hormones and instead releasing endorphins, a natural pain reliever said to be more powerful than morphine which are only released when we relax.”

Contact: Hypnobirthing Australia, www.hypnobirthingaustralia.com.au

Massage

A massage is wonderful at any time, but it can provide pure bliss during labour. “Massage supports labouring women through the waves of contractions, giving them relief, rest and reassurance,” explains Catherine McInerney, Director of Pregnancy Massage Australia. “Women say that they have been able to remain at home longer by using massage for pain relief, so allowing their labour to establish well.” So who gives the massage? “It should be performed by the woman’s support person(s), who has learned correct labour massage techniques during private Labour Massage Partner Training

sessions,” explains McInerney. “These sessions run for 90 minutes to two hours, and people learn techniques that will minimise contraction intensity, recognise contraction onset, and help with recovery and rest between contractions.”

Contact: Pregnancy Massage Australia, www.pregnancymassageaustralia.com.au

Yoga

If you think this means assuming the lotus position while pushing, think again! According to Julia Willoughby, founder of Yoga for Birth and Beyond, it’s about learning valuable skills to help with stress and pain. “Prenatal yoga classes teach five key elements: breathing, relaxation skills, being active during the birth, mental focus and sound work,” she says. “If women change the way they breathe during labour, they can change their whole experience of birth. Slow breaths calm the nervous system down and increase endorphins, which in turn ease pain. The pain can be intense, especially if a woman gets into the fear-tension-pain cycle. We teach skills to deal with the stress and pain, no matter what type of birth happens. Yoga is also about being aware of your body and relaxing: if a woman is aware of when she becomes tense and stressed, then she is more likely to use relaxation skills to let go. Being active during the birth – being in an upright position and moving the pelvis - also reduces pain. Prenatal yoga classes help women gain the strength to maintain these positions. The last two skills, mental focus and sound work, help to empower women during birth. The first might include visualisations and affirmations in terms of being positive about what’s happening, while sound work boosts endorphins. For example, during labour we teach them to make sounds like ‘ahhh’ when exhaling – they might be embarrassed to do it during prenatal class

Did you know?
Doula is a Greek word that means ‘a woman who serves’.

– but during labour, it really helps.”

Contact: Yoga for Birth and Beyond, www.yogaforbirhandbeyond.com.au

Doula

Kristin Beckedahl, childbirth educator and doula, says feeling supported physically and emotionally during pregnancy and labour helps women manage the pain of childbirth. “A doula provides a trusted and familiar face who knows the woman’s wishes around her birth, and stays by her side the entire time,” she says. “They may suggest positions that help labour progress faster, and help keep her more comfortable during contractions - typically getting off the bed, sitting or rocking on a fitball, using the shower or birth pool, slow walking, gentle lunging or stair-walking, and other active birthing positions, plus comfort measures like massage and counter pressure techniques, or the use of pressure points. Keeping a woman calm during labour greatly helps with her pain. Calm, gentle encouragement and reassurance from the doula at pivotal times in labour can significantly help a woman through the challenge of birthing. I recommend that women and their partners meet with at least three doulas before deciding who they feel is the right person for them.”

Contact: Australian Doulas, www.austriandoulas.com.au, www.findadoula.com.au

Meet our experts

Making birth naturally calm and pain-free.



Dr Bill Meyers, president of Australian Medical Acupuncture College (AMAC)



Kristin Beckedahl, childbirth educator and doula



Julia Willoughby, founder of Yoga for Birth and Beyond



Melissa Spilsted, director of Hypnobirthing Australia



Catherine McInerney, Director of Pregnancy Massage Australia