

The Secret of Abdominal Breathing

During the first stage of labor, with each contraction you will breathe with your abdomen and relax completely. Between contractions you may do what you feel like doing and breathe comfortably. Abdominal breathing and relaxation belong together. You do them better together than you are able to do each separately. Your ability to do both will increase with practice, so the amount of time you spend at it beforehand will pay great dividends during labor.

I have already discussed relaxation and referred to abdominal breathing. Now we will learn the basics of abdominal breathing and from then on you should do the two together.

When you breathe abdominally, you have the feeling that great amounts of air are being pulled into your abdominal cavity. This is impossible, of course. What is happening is that the diaphragm is pulling down into the abdomen so that the lungs can expand fully. The diaphragm is a muscle which acts as a bellows. It pulls down and air is sucked into the lungs. It pushes up and the lungs are emptied. Naturally, the bigger the amounts of air you take into your lungs, the slower your breathing will be and the higher your abdominal wall will rise.

When you inhale, your abdomen rises—as you exhale, it lowers. The breathing must be very slow and full. Give plenty of time for each part of the breath.

Natural Childbirth Exercises

Since your body will be working very hard during labor, you will require great quantities of oxygen to fulfill your needs. At the same time, you must be totally relaxed for your labor to progress smoothly and easily. I do not recommend that you do this, but if you ran around the outside of your house, then put yourself into a relaxation position and practiced abdominal breathing, you would get the feeling of the kind of breathing required during labor. You would also notice that you needed your mouth open to get enough breath. Your muscles must be relaxed but your body is working hard and therefore requires big deep breaths. So when we say, “Relax and breathe slowly and deeply,” the effect in practice will be different from the real thing in labor.

Raising the abdominal wall as high as possible is important in labor for another reason. The uterus, as it tightens with a contraction, will bulge. This pushes it against the abdominal wall. Now, if your abdominal muscles are relaxed and being raised slowly with abdominal breathing, there will be minimal discomfort when the contracting, bulging uterus pushes against the abdominal wall. Pull tight on the abdominal muscles and see the tension created between two hard, contracted muscles—the uterus and the abdomen. Make sure you remember this when you are in labor.

Relaxing with abdominal breathing keeps the abdominal muscles soft and relaxed and slowly pushed away from the contracting uterus by your big oxygen-laden inhalation. During exhalation, the abdominal wall along with the whole body remains relaxed to avoid interference with the work of the contracting uterus.

It is so simple and makes such good sense! You are trying to let the uterus do its work by staying out of its way. At the same time you must supply it with necessary materials. Deep breathing will supply the necessary amounts of oxygen to the blood. A good position allows adequate circulation to the uterus so the blood supply reaches it. The side-lying position best serves this need. However, the contour position is a possible variation. Remember that lots of stretching and moving about between contractions will help keep you comfortable.

Abdominal breathing is necessary

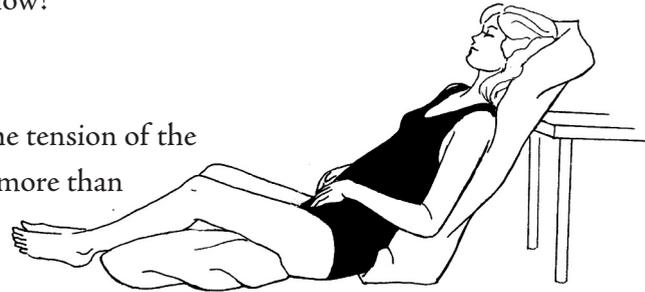
First ... you need the large amount of oxygen that this type of deep breathing will allow. Ordinary breathing, usually much more shallow, cannot easily serve the great oxygen needs of the laboring body.

Secondly ... you can relax much better if you breathe in this manner, and only with relaxation will you be comfortable during first-stage labor.

Thirdly ... the control used in the breathing helps give you the mastery of your body required to “ride” with each contraction of the uterus. You are the director of this show!

HOW:

1. Lie in a contour position with knees raised to lessen the tension of the abdominal muscles. This position is for learning how, more than for labor. As soon as you have learned the technique, you may practice on your side in a relaxed position.
2. Put hands low on abdomen so that you can feel the pubic bone. This guides you to take a deeper breath than if your hands are higher up on the abdomen.
3. Open your mouth and take a deep breath. Let the breath push your abdomen and hands up.
4. Slowly let your breath out and hands and abdomen go down again.
5. Repeat and practice for about two minutes. Breathe normally except you will be using your diaphragm and your abdomen will move.



Natural Childbirth Exercises

6. Now put one hand up on your chest. There should be no chest movement as you continue to breathe abdominally.

Stop and rest! Now continue, and make each breath as long in duration as is comfortable. Try to “fill your abdomen” with air. Notice the difference between letting the breath push your abdomen up and having the muscles lift your abdomen.

You *must not* tense your muscles. For you to be comfortable in labor, your abdominal wall must remain relaxed while the uterus is contracting. Sometimes this can be a confusing thing but your husband will be able to feel the difference with his hand and can coach you to know when you are doing well. Practice together now so that you’ll be a good team when labor begins. He could read Dr. Bradley’s *Husband-Coached Childbirth fifth edition* (edited and revised by Margie, Jay and James Hathaway), to aid him in his understanding of the coach’s role.

WHERE:

Where do you practice? In bed, as you lie down for an afternoon rest (it is a lovely idea, isn’t it?) and when you are ready for sleep at night. Do several minutes of concentrated relaxation with abdominal breathing each time.

Begin to use abdominal breathing during the day as you think of it. As you first learn this type of breathing, you may despair that it will ever become easy. It quickly becomes a comfortable way of breathing, though, and by the time you go into labor, it should come very naturally. The more you practice, the easier your first stage of labor will be. When your labor reaches an intensity that demands your attention start relaxing and abdominal breathing with each contraction until the first stage of labor is completed and you are ready to begin pushing.

The Secret of Abdominal Breathing

WHEN:

During pregnancy—Practice often during pregnancy, at least three times each day, taking several breaths. Consider two minutes a good amount of time for a practice contraction, although a contraction would not likely be this long—one minute to one and one-half minutes is more likely, even at transition (end of the first stage).

You will soon learn to breathe abdominally in other positions so that you can practice it all day long. Practice it while lying in a contour position until you know for sure how to do it, and then alternate with the side-lying relaxation position.

In labor—With each contraction, relax completely and take deep, slow, full abdominal breaths. Continue with abdominal breathing and relaxation for the total time of each contraction. In between you can stretch, move, talk or even go to sleep. With the next contraction, go back to “work” immediately.

Rhonda's Tip

Any time you have the opportunity to lie down, practice abdominal breathing. As your pregnancy advances and your uterus and belly expand, knowing how to maximize your breathing will not only benefit you overall, it will ease your labor.

