

# Relaxation Suggestions for Pregnancy and Labor

Being able to relax at will is an important skill to have during labor. Pain and fear can naturally make you tense. Tension in your body can make your contractions more painful. Relaxing frees your body and helps with labor.

The ability to relax is not limited to the day of labor. As your due date approaches and your excitement and anxiety grow, you may need to be able to relax just to fall asleep or steal an afternoon catnap. After your baby arrives, the ability to relax may help you get past some of the harder parts of new parenthood. Some of our favorite relaxation techniques include:

## **Aromatherapy: Take time to smell the roses.**

Aromatherapy is one of the newest therapeutic techniques, although the effects of smells have been known since ancient times. Different smells, practitioners say, can evoke different feelings. Sometimes the effect is physical—the chemical substances that create a particular aroma affect different organs of the body. Sometimes the effect is emotional—a smell may stimulate pleasant memories.

For aromatherapy, a smell is provided by an “essential oil,” a concentrated extract of a plant. Lavender can have both physical and emotional effects. It can soothe headaches or an upset stomach and often reminds people of a favorite place or person.

Lavender and chamomile are relaxants and make good choices for a venture into aromatherapy. Essential oils can be applied to a cotton ball. Lie down comfortably inhale a whiff of the aroma to aide with relaxation. Herbal teas or a soothing bath can also help.

## **Music: Let the music play.**

Music is another ancient therapeutic technique. Music that relaxes you while you are pregnant will also help you relax during labor. Try pacing your breathing to the rhythm of the music. Experiment with different kinds of music. Make a playlist that you enjoy for your labor.

## **Yoga: Relax with yoga or meditation.**

Techniques adapted from yoga can be particularly relaxing. Find a comfortable position on a bed or padded surface, preferably on your side with your back supported with pillows. Consciously tighten and relax your muscles starting with your toes. Bend your toes for a few seconds; then relax them. Flex your ankles, and then relax them. Move slowly upward through calves, thighs, stomach, buttocks, hands, arms, mouth, and so on, tensing and relaxing each in turn. Breathe comfortably. Lie down quietly for a few minutes and concentrate on gently inhaling and exhaling, freeing your mind of any other thoughts.

## **Massage: Give yourself a massage.**

The best massage is one that someone gives you, but if this isn't possible, give yourself a massage. The only guidelines are to find a comfortable position for yourself, dim the lights, play some music if you like, and do what feels good.

**Abdomen:** The best known self-massage for pregnant women is known as effleurage: gently moving the fingertips, often in a circular pattern, over your belly. Effleurage is also a good technique to use in labor.

**Scalp:** Grasp clumps of hair in each hand, pulling gently, and rotating your hands for a few seconds. Move on to other clumps of your hair. You will look like you are pulling your hair out! After you have had enough, knead your scalp with your fingertips.

**Neck and face:** Move your fingertips to the back of your neck and massage it in a circular motion. Move on to your cheeks, mouth, and forehead, applying slightly more pressure on the upward half of the circular motion than on the downward stroke. Try to keep your fingers in contact with your skin throughout the massage.

**Hands and feet:** Knead your palms, fingers, soles, and toes with your thumb and palm. Concentrate on feeling how the pressure of the massage releases tension in your hands and feet.

## **Visualization: Picture yourself relaxed.**

Visualization becomes easier with practice and practicing can be enjoyable. Again, find a comfortable position for yourself, dim the lights, close your eyes, and picture yourself in a place—real or imaginary—where you feel happy and safe. Many parents-to-be picture themselves lying on a beach with a warm sun, cool breezes, and the sound of the waves breaking. The best part is that you can stay in your relaxation place as long as you like; no reservations are necessary!