

How painful is BIRTH?

Moaning, screaming, and cursing. These are some of the sounds commonly associated with birth. You've likely seen birth graphically depicted on TV or a movie, or if you're pregnant, all of your family and friends may have decided to share their harrowing birth stories with you. If you're like most people, this has led to fear about the amount of pain you may face during labour.

Is this really that bad? How painful will it be, and can I handle it? While birth is different for everyone, birth is painful. But the great news, it's manageable. In fact, nearly half of first-time mums (46 percent) said the pain they experienced with their first was better than they expected,

Pain is a very personal thing, no one will be able to understand the type of pain you have and how it makes you feel. This is true of all pain, whether you have broken your leg or are in labour. The difference with pain during labour and birth is that it has a slow build up which allows your body to produce it's own pain killers to help you cope. To fully understand why we have this pain we need to understand what causes it and why.

Pain is subjective and can vary greatly, it isn't solely dependent on an isolated physical sensation. Rather, it's affected by a person's fears, mood, memories, and personality, as well as factors like the duration and overall experience of the pain source.

Pain is not usually consistent during the labour process, and you'll probably experience breaks from it between contractions or while pushing. Although, you may notice though that it increases after your water breaks or as labour picks up, and that some elements of the pain are temporary while others continue for a period of time after giving birth.

What is birth pain like?

For a few, it will be relatively quick, straightforward and require little more than water or gas to relieve the pain, if at all. For the majority, it will last for around 12 to 24 hours and start with gentle contractions. As labour progresses and the contractions become more frequent the sensation of them becomes different. But this is not pain in the traditional sense. It is not a warning of impending danger or a nudge to seek medical advice. This time of your life is 'an awakening' and, like being roused from sleep your body takes on a new meaning. It has grown and nourished your baby and now is working to help you to give birth. This is not an illness or a warning of disease or something you need to be saved from. This is a journey and the contractions that your body is having should be seen as that.

Our pain nerves.

There are three types of nerves in our bodies, motor, sensory and a mix of motor and sensory. The nerves that give us our perception of pain in labour are sensory nerves and they are found throughout our bodies. It is these nerves that pick up all the information from our uterus, our back and down through the vagina. When doing any type of physical activity your muscles become sore and you take a rest. Muscles become sore because not enough oxygen is getting to them. If you practiced this same exercise, over time your body would become more efficient at delivering more oxygen to these muscles and you could work for longer before you felt the same pain.

Your uterus is no different. It is a large muscle, working extremely hard for hours so it stands to reason that you would experience pain from this. With your uterus, this is not possible but you can use relaxation exercises to increase the amount of oxygen that you take into your body with each breath which will help.

What is a contraction?

The word 'contraction' is a medical term used to describe exactly what the muscles in your uterus are doing. But labour and birth are so much more refined than that and to talk of the process of your baby being born in such simplistic medical terms is to do it an injustice. These are 'contractions' or 'surges', as your body takes on a new role and, with each contraction your body and your baby work in harmony. That is the natural effect of exercise. If we are exercising, we don't usually decide beforehand to take pain relief in order to train harder, we embrace it. We embrace the good that it does and the way it makes us feel - like we've accomplished something we set out to do.

Why then do we treat labour so differently?

Is it because we are in that situation for longer; but what of 'ultra-runners' and athletes? They will push their bodies for long periods, time and time again. How do they manage it? The answer is that they mentally prepare. They accept that there will be pain that they will cope with it and find a way of ignoring it and they do not fear it, they welcome it in fact.

This is how you should approach labour. The pain that you may have is just the muscles of your uterus contracting and they do this for 60 seconds on average. With each contraction, focus on your breathing, be aware that when the contraction stops the pain will cease. You are in control, this is your body and you are not a passenger, this is your journey. Like exercise you are asking your body to work hard for one minute and then rest, there is nothing to fear.

And essentially that is it, your body will very rarely have you in more pain than you can cope with.

What can help?

I want you to recall a time that you were in pain, think about what your breathing was like? Did it speed up and become shallow, limiting the amount of oxygen you take in? Or did you hold your breath? Holding your breath is not a great idea, you'll deprive yourself (and your baby) of oxygen therefore you'll feel more pain and who wants that! **Remember to breathe....**

When you are in labour the pain is caused due to lack of oxygen to the uterus and is similar to the pain people experience during heart attacks. With a heart attack, extra oxygen is given via a face mask, in labour you can simply use breathing and relaxation exercises.

The other area of pain you may experience is the muscles of your vagina and cervix stretching to accommodate your baby. Again breathing exercises will help with this type of pain but so will supporting yourself in water. Water is amazing for pain relief, the warmth relaxes and soothes muscles and the buoyancy ensures that the large leg muscles aren't using up too much of your body's oxygen. Also, the back pain you may experience in labour may be soothed with water and breathing exercises.

Low vocalisations may help you through the pain too.

Many different types of massage can help manage pain during labour. Foot, hand, back, and shoulder rubs may all appeal to you. One study from 2010 found that a 15-minute massage each hour during labour helped alleviate pain and was even associated with shorter labor.

In addition to massage, many women enjoy counter-pressure being strategically placed on parts of their body such as your hips or lower back to help counteract the discomforts you may be feeling. Music can lower stress and blood pressure. It can also improve your mood! But can it really help with pain during labour? Yes — a large meta-analysis found that music interventions helped alleviate pain and anxiety during labour.

There's no way to know exactly what childbirth will be like for you. There's no reason to be fearful about giving birth. While it's called labour for a reason, millions of babies are born each year. remember that it's purposeful, anticipated, intermittent, and a necessary part of your baby coming into this world and you're not alone!