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How birth companions can support providers during labour and delivery

Breakthrough RESEARCH

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How birth companions can support providers during labour and delivery



What are companions and why are they important?

Every woman has the right to be accompanied by a birth companion. This companion can be any person chosen by the woman:

- Stay with her during labour and childbirth;
- Accompany her to the hospital, **even during the COVID-19 pandemic**, and;
- Support the woman after the baby is born until discharge.

Women value and benefit from the presence of someone they trust. With a trusted companion present, women are more likely to:

- Feel **safe, strong, confident, and secure**.
- Feel like they can **ask questions of the providers**.
- Feel support from providers about their anxieties and fears.
- Have **better maternal and perinatal outcomes**.

Having an individual of her choice is of greater benefit than having staff from the facility as her companion.

- Midwives and other health providers can explain things to the woman and companion;
- Companions may also **assist the midwife** in small tasks she may ask her to do;
- **Companions can speak up in support of women** to ensure they receive assistance on time; and
- Trusted companions can provide **practical and emotional support** throughout labour and delivery.

What can a companion do?

Provide support to the woman during labour. The companion can:

- ✓ Encourage her and rub the woman's back, legs, and arms as needed, to help relieve pain
- ✓ Wipe her brow, neck, or chest with a wet cloth or fan her to keep her cool
- ✓ Hold her hand between contractions, if she wants
- ✓ Assist her to walk around and find a position that is comfortable to her
- ✓ Assist her to the toilet and help her take a bath/shower in early labour if she chooses
- ✓ Talk to her—give emotional support and provide information on what is happening
- ✓ Remind her that it is okay to shout, yell, or cry out during the delivery
- ✓ Help the woman to relax between contractions and use deep breathing exercises



Companions can support the labour process by assisting the midwife with whatever she/he asks, and by reminding and encouraging the woman to:

- ✓ Urinate every 2 hours
- ✓ Drink fluids every hour or more and eat lightly as she wishes
- ✓ Use breathing methods that can help her relax
- ✓ Use comfortable positions for labour (walking, sitting, side-lying)
- ✓ Push only when guided by the midwife



Companions can support communication between the midwife and the woman by:

- ✓ Listening to the midwife's instructions and helping communicate them to the woman
- ✓ Helping the woman ask questions and making sure she gets the information she needs
- ✓ Make sure the midwife hears and responds to the woman's requests [e.g., painkillers]
- ✓ Making sure referral plans are pre-established and adhered to as necessary.
- ✓ Updating the family on how the woman is doing



After delivery, birth companions can help:

- ✓ Observe woman and baby closely, check for danger signs such as abnormal bleeding, report such bleeding to midwife
- ✓ Ensure the woman is properly counseled on self care and baby care by the midwife
- ✓ After normal delivery, encourage the woman to drink fluids regularly
- ✓ Make sure the woman is not separated from the baby (unless medically indicated)
- ✓ Ensure skin-to-skin contact is maintained
- ✓ Support early initiation of breastfeeding
- ✓ Report bleeding from cord and difficulties in baby's breathing
- ✓ Help the midwife dress, take care of, and check the baby and help the new mother change the nappy/diaper



What should you as a provider ask or remind a companion?

As a provider, you can ensure that birth companions **know to call for help if:**

- ✓ A routine assessment is due but the midwife is not around
- ✓ The woman's amniotic membrane ruptures
- ✓ The woman is bearing down with contractions
- ✓ Contractions have been regular but suddenly stop
- ✓ She is suddenly in much more pain
- ✓ She loses consciousness or has fits
- ✓ If she feels drowsy or collapses
- ✓ There is heavy vaginal bleeding
- ✓ She is breathing fast and feels "clammy" or she feels her heart is racing
- ✓ The baby is not suckling
- ✓ If there is any other concern



Remind the birth companion that they **SHOULD:**

- ✓ Wash their hands with soap before entering or leaving the labour ward
- ✓ Wear a mask during labour and delivery (following COVID-19 guidelines)
- ✓ Wash their hands before and after touching the baby
- ✓ Ensure cleanliness of the woman's space in the labour ward and postnatal room
- ✓ Follow other infection prevention guidelines (including COVID-19 guidelines)



Remind the companion that they **should NOT:**

- ⊗ Slap or yell at the woman
- ⊗ Encourage the woman to push unless asked by midwife
- ⊗ Give advice other than that given by the midwife
- ⊗ Keep the woman in bed if she wants to move around
- ⊗ Provide any local medicine/ herbs or conduct any physical examinations
- ⊗ Disclose any confidential information
- ⊗ Bring any other companions or family members into the labour ward



Briefing the companion: What to expect during childbirth

As some companions may have never experienced a birth before, please take a few minutes to brief the companion **on what to expect during labour and delivery** and **how they can best support you**, healthcare provider

Upon arrival, **orient the companion to labour & delivery unit**, particularly if you are working alone. Show her/him where essential supplies are stored, and **make a plan for how the companion can help in an emergency**.

- Where another nurse, doctor or midwife can be found to help.
- Bandages, gauze pads and sterile water.
- If a NASG is available, where it is stored and how to assist with putting it on.
- Where shower or bathing facilities are located, and where urine can be disposed.
- The companion's presence and support does NOT replace midwife; they should always follow what the midwife tells them.

Labour and childbirth differ from pregnancy to pregnancy, but there are always four basic stages: early and active labour, birth, delivery of the placenta, and recovery. Please **describe the key events that happen during each stage so the companion and woman knows what to expect.**

There are many common procedures that happen during birth, but with which the companion may not be familiar. Briefly **explain the following procedures and their timing:**

- Palpating the abdomen to check contractions, ½ hourly.
- Checking the foetal heart rate, ½ hourly.
- Vaginal or pelvic examinations are conducted once every four hours.
- Ultrasound monitoring (if available).

- Giving an injection or starts an IV line.

Emergency situations sometimes occur. In these situations it will be very important to act quickly:

- **There may not be time for thorough explanations.**
- Trust the midwife and do whatever they ask.
- It may be most helpful to stand at the head of the woman to comfort her and support slow deep breathing.

If the companion cannot manage a difficult situation, they can leave at any time, but should inform the midwife or nurse on duty.

If a companion is disruptive or creates a dangerous situation, they will be asked to leave.

What you as a provider can ask the companion to do to support you:



Emotional support and comfort to woman: Ask the companion to comfort the woman, encourage her and massage her back to ease the pain. Assist the woman with elimination when needed.



Food and water: Ask the companion to prepare food and water and keep it close by. Encourage the woman to eat and drink as desired.



Extra pair of hands: Remind the companion to not go far from the delivery room and ask them to do simple tasks as needed.



Torch bearer: If needed, you can ask the companion to switch on a light or hold a torch when you check on the woman during and after delivery.



Bleeding monitor: After delivery, tell the companion to regularly ask the mother and check the bed for bleeding, and report to the midwife if there is blood.



Baby care: You can ask the companion to help dress, take care of, and check the baby. Check the baby for danger signs

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