

# DOULAS: A WOMAN'S TOUCH

In most other cultures in the world, as in times past in our own culture, women are surrounded by supportive family/friends during birth. It is only with the movement of birth from home to the hospital and with the loosening of extended family ties that women came to birth in the isolated fashion that is the norm in our society.

Doulas offer birthing couples not only valuable support and information as they prepare for their birth, but also caring, personal labor support that is not offered by any other member of the birth team. Doulas are the only member of your birth team who will support you in your home for the earlier stages of active labor. There is no other member of your team who is responsible for supporting you and your partner emotionally. Your doula is the familiar face overseeing everything at your birth, helping you navigate hospital politics and policies and reminding you that you can, when it feels so very much like you can't.

Although many women expect that their nurse will provide labor support (if they are birthing in a hospital), the truth is that nurses often do not have skills to provide labor support. Nurses may be responsible for caring for several women in labor at a time and will more than likely not have the time to devote to supporting you. Another important point to remember is that nurses do not work for you; they work for the hospital. If your interests or wishes are in conflict with those of the hospital, it is difficult for a nurse to support you.

At homebirths and birth centers, doulas complement the care and support given by a midwife. Because the midwife is responsible for your and your baby's physical well-being, it is important that she be sharp, well-rested and ready when birth is imminent. When labor is long, your midwife can catch a nap, knowing that you are being well cared for by your doula. When the moment arrives for your baby to be born, your doula is focused on your and your partner's emotional well-being, while your midwife focuses on making sure that baby and mother are safe.

Doulas, professional labor support/professional labor assistants, provide valuable emotional and physical support for a laboring woman and her husband. Doulas offer laboring couples a bigger "bag of tricks" for coping with labor, as well as suggestions for alternatives to medical procedures and assistance in navigating hospital politics. In addition, their presence has been proven by clinical research to provide the following benefits. The presence of family members has not been proven to provide the same benefits.

- ★ 50% reduction in cesarean section
- ★ Labor shortened by 25%
- ★ Use of pitocin reduced by 40%
- ★ Pain medication use reduced by 30%
- ★ Forcep application reduced by 40%
- ★ Requests for epidurals reduced by 60%

(Kennell J, Klaus M, McGrath S, Robertson S, Hinkley C. Continuous emotional support during labor in a US hospital: a randomized controlled trial. *JAMA* 1991;265(17):p. 2197-2201.)

The benefits a doula offers to mothers and babies extend beyond labor and birth. At six weeks postpartum, women who had a doula (as compared to women who did not have a doula) had a higher incidence of breastfeeding, were less anxious, had higher self-esteem, were less likely to be depressed, reported more satisfaction with their partners (both groups reported similar satisfaction with their partners before their births), and regarded both themselves and their babies in a more positive light.

For more information about doulas, see *The Doula Book: How a Trained Labor Companion Can Help You Have a Shorter, Easier and Healthier Birth* (Klaus, Kennell and Klaus) or contact:

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