

Giving Birth: Labor Pain

There are many drug and drug-free ways to help you cope with labor pain. The benefits of some methods are better understood than others. Many women want to know about the effectiveness and downsides of specific methods of pain relief; researchers have given more attention to effectiveness and less to possible downsides.

In these tables, we summarize labor pain relief options, as known from systematic reviews published since 2005. Some pain relief strategies (e.g., showers, warm packs, music, visualization) are not covered below because we did not find systematic reviews about their effects.

To learn more, please visit the labor pain section of the Childbirth Connection website: childbirthconnection.org/giving-birth/labor-pain.

Clearly helpful for labor pain relief: Evidence is robust

Method	Type	Effectiveness	Cons
Continuous labor support (doula support)	Drug-free	Reduces use of epidural, other pain medications	No known side effects
Immersion in water during labor	Drug-free	Reduces use of epidural and spinal epidural	No known side effects
Upright position, moving about	Drug-free	Reduces use of epidural	No known side effects
Nitrous oxide	Drug	Less effective than epidural	Drowsiness, nausea possible
Epidural	Drug	Reduces labor pain; generally very effective	Increased risk of many side effects and use of many interventions
Combined spinal epidural (CSE)	Drug	Reduces labor pain; generally very effective	Increased risk of many side effects and use of many interventions
Opioids (narcotics) by IV line or injection	Drug	Less effective than epidural, modest pain relief and satisfaction	Drowsiness, nausea

Appears to be at least somewhat helpful for labor pain relieve: Evidence is robust

Method	Type	Effectiveness	Cons
Relaxation, yoga	Drug-free	Less pain, more satisfaction with pain relief	No known side effects
Acupuncture or acupressure	Drug-free	Less use of pain medications, less pain, more satisfaction with pain relief	No known side effects
Massage	Drug-free	Less pain	No known side effects
Birth ball	Drug-free	Less pain (few studies to date)	No known side effects
Sterile water injections (for low-back pain)	Drug-free	Less pain	No known side effects

Best current research does not show clear help for labor pain relief

Method	Type	Effectiveness
Hypnosis self- and practitioner-guided	Drug-free	Better studies have found no difference in use of labor pain medications and satisfaction with pain relief method
Music	Drug-free	Limited studies have found no difference in labor pain intensity and satisfaction with pain relief
Biofeedback	Drug-free	Limited studies have found no difference in use of labor pain medications
Aromatherapy	Drug-free	Limited studies found no difference in use of epidural and labor pain intensity
TENS (trans-cutaneous electrical nerve stimulation)	Drug-free	Not clearly effective for labor pain
NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs), sedatives, antihistamines	Drug	A small number of older studies cannot clarify whether various non-opiod drugs are helpful for labor pain

Childbirth Connection, a program of the National Partnership for Women & Families, works to improve the quality, outcomes and value of maternity care in the United States. Learn more at ChildbirthConnection.org and NationalPartnership.org.

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