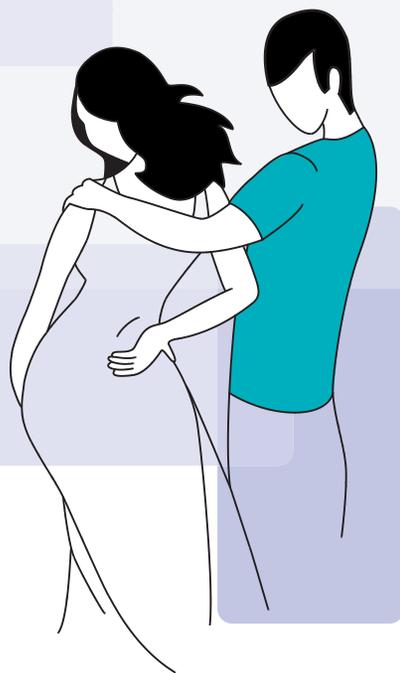


Positions in labour and delivery

Will you lie down, stand up, sit or squat – or do a mixture of all four? No one knows for sure what is best for you and your baby when you go into labour and this is a time of choices and decisions. In order to help you decide what is right for you and your baby, you need information about any potential advantages or disadvantages that there might be in the options available.



This leaflet is based on research to help you make your own choice



In collaboration with the Centre for
Reviews and Dissemination

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Although the common image of a woman in labour is for her to be lying on a bed propped up with pillows, women who have been in this position (and about three quarters of women have spent their labour like this) say that the next time they give birth they want to be upright. Current research would support that they might be better off this way.

This leaflet explains what we know about the advantages and disadvantages of different positions. It's worth thinking about what you'd like to do – if you want to kneel or squat, you may need to practise now!

Labour stages

Researchers have looked at the advantages of being upright during the first stage of labour – from the time contractions start until you're ready to push – and in the second stage - when you start to push and the baby is born.



What we know

First stage

Advantages

There are advantages to staying off the bed and keeping upright during the **first stage** of labour. This could mean standing, sitting, squatting, kneeling or walking around and using a range of props to help you. When compared with labour lying down the research found that staying up and moving about led to:

- a less painful labour
- less need for an epidural or painkilling injection
- a slightly shorter labour.

Women who chose to give birth in an upright position said they would choose an upright position for a future labour. Women who gave birth lying down said they would prefer a different position next time.

Disadvantages

There are no known disadvantages. However, some women may find it tiring to stay in an upright position during their labour, and women with a physical disability may have more problems being up and about (there is more information at the end of this leaflet).



Second stage

Being upright during the **second stage** could mean kneeling, squatting, sitting fairly straight, or using a birth stool. Most of the research so far has involved women sitting on birth chairs or stools.

Advantages

- You may feel more comfortable and have less pain.
- It helps when you need to push and pushing is said to be easier.
- There is less chance of having a suction cup (ventouse), forceps or caesarean delivery.
- There is less chance of tearing the vagina or the skin between your vagina and anus (also called the perineum).
- Babies stand a better chance of breathing straightaway as soon as they are born.
- There is a slightly greater chance of your labour being shorter.

Disadvantages

There is more chance that you could tear the lips around the vagina (labia). Women who use a birth chair or stool have been found to lose more blood (but not enough to cause a problem). This doesn't seem to happen in other upright positions.

Being upright – why it could help

- The effect of gravity helps your baby to move down the birth passage more easily and more quickly.
- There is less pressure on the blood vessels that go to your womb – these provide your baby's oxygen supply.
- Your baby could be in a better position for passing through your pelvis.
- Your contractions could work better. This helps the cervix to open up more quickly and can make labour shorter.
- When you squat or kneel, your pelvis may open wider and make more room for the baby to come through.
- It can make it easier to be massaged in labour and for others to support you.

What we don't know

These advantages and disadvantages were found by research studies that looked into the effects of position on women's labours and the health of the baby. There are still areas that we know very little about, an example would be if you are free to use any position you like, would you naturally find the positions which are most comfortable for you? Maybe just being able to choose your position as well as feeling relaxed and in a comfortable environment are important, rather than any particular position itself (see the Informed Choice leaflet '*Support in labour*').

Have a go!

Why not try out various positions at home or in your parent education sessions? If you are having your baby in hospital you can check what's available in the way of bean bags, birth balls, rocking chairs, birth stools, birthpools and so on. Ask if you can't find what you want. Being prepared before you go into labour will help you feel more in control. The midwives should be able to get what you need, or you may be able to bring something in yourself.

Your choice

You can choose which positions you want to use for your labour and birth, but whatever thoughts you have before you go into labour, these should probably remain flexible. When you are in labour you may want to change position frequently; if you get tired and want to lie down for a while, it is fine. You may want to prop yourself up with pillows or lie down on your side, but lying flat on your back reduces the blood flow to your baby and may affect the baby's heart rate.

Some of the equipment used during labour, for example the machines that monitor your baby's heartbeat and epidurals, will stop you moving about freely. Talk to your midwife about the use of these in relation to what effect they will have on your choice of position.

How to find out more

If you would like to know more about different positions during labour and delivery, discuss this leaflet with your midwife or doctor:

For more detailed information, ask your midwife or doctor for the professionals' version of this leaflet.

