

# Every Woman Deserves a Doula

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Pregnant? *You deserve a doula!*

Know Someone Who is Pregnant?

Know Someone Who Might Be Pregnant Someday?

*Tell her she deserves a doula!*

## What is a Doula?

Imagine having a compassionate, knowledgeable, and experienced woman to call during your pregnancy, birth, and postpartum when you have questions or just need someone to talk to. Or imagine knowing that all of your needs, whims, and desires will be taken care of while you're in labor. And then imagine that your partner will feel comfortable to support you and enjoy your child's birth and not feel pressured to remember everything he or she learned in your childbirth classes. Hiring a doula (pronounced *doo-la*) is an important option for parents. And it's not such a new option, either. Women around the world have loved their doulas since the beginning of time.

A *birth doula* is a woman trained and experienced in childbirth who provides continuous physical, emotional, and informational support to a woman during late pregnancy, labor, birth and the early postpartum period. *Postpartum* doulas care for new families in the first weeks after birth providing household help, advice with newborn care and feeding, and emotional support.



A massage therapist and a birth doula supporting a mother during labor.

Birth doulas help women and their birth partners in labor to have a safe and satisfying birth experience. Doulas are compassionate women who draw on their knowledge and experience to provide emotional support, physical comfort and education. If needed, they can also help parents communicate with their caregivers to

make sure that mothers have the information they need to make informed decisions in labor. Your doula can provide reassurance, perspective, guidance, and help you with relaxation, positioning and other techniques for comfort (including massage!).

Most doulas are independent and self-employed, but it is possible to find a group who work together in various ways. Usually, though, parents choose one particular doula and it is

that doula that they get to know and that doula who will attend their birth. All doulas are working directly for the mother, not a mother's medical care-giver or birth place. And some birth doulas are also childbirth educators, breastfeeding counselors, birth photographers, reiki practitioners, massage therapists, belly cast artists, and some homebirth midwives also provide doula services.

## What Are the Benefits Having a Doula?

According to evidence-based research, birth doulas can have great effects on birth outcomes, such as shorter labors, fewer complications, a reduced risk of Cesarean birth, less need for medication to speed up labor, and fewer requests for pain medication or epidurals (especially if the mother starts labor not intending to use medication)\*.

And what's probably most important—mothers who have a birth doula report greater satisfaction with their birth and suffer less from postpartum depression. And babies born to mothers who have a doula have shorter hospital stays and fewer admissions to special care nurseries, and those babies also tend to breastfeed more easily.

Contrary to popular belief, a doula is not only for women who want a non-medicated birth, although having a doula greatly increases a woman's likelihood of having a non-medicated birth, if that is what a woman wants. But what if you know you want an epidural or you are having a planned Cesarean birth? Most doulas are willing to support moms who plan to request an epidural for their labor and birth, after ensuring that the moms are well-informed about the benefits, risks, and alternatives of medication for pain in labor. There is still a good bit that doulas can do for moms and birth partners even when a mother chooses an epidural, such as help coping with labor until the pain medication is given, guiding the mom in position changes to encourage progress in labor, and help with pushing for the birth, among many other things. And if a mother needs to plan a Cesarean birth, there are still benefits of having a doula in that situation, too, such as helping parents prepare for surgery both with information and creating a calm environment, comforting the mother during the surgery, and taking pictures of the new family immediately after the baby is born. And, of course, the early postpartum support for moms and babies that doulas provide is invaluable post-surgery.

## What Does a Doula Do?

A birth doula provides many services for mothers and their partners (and for single moms). It is best to talk to several doulas on the phone and at least a couple in person to get a better idea of their personalities, philosophies, and services. Ultimately, choose the doula you have the best "gut feeling" about, or the doula with whom you "click

with” the most. It’s very important to feel absolutely comfortable with your doula so you can be honest, open, uninhibited, and trust that your personal choices respected above all.

“Being a doula isn’t just what I do...  
it is who I am.”  
~unknown

Most doulas meet with mothers at least once during late pregnancy, but more commonly twice. During this time they get to know one another, ask questions, find out what moms wishes are for the birth, how mom’s partner wants to be involved and supported, and they also might practice positions for laboring at home or in the hospital. Since preparing for a good birth experience is often based on knowledge and confidence, doulas provide a lot of ideas and evidence-based information to help moms and their partners make informed decisions—most doulas give moms an information packet to read.

In the last few weeks of pregnancy, moms and doulas tend to spend a good bit of time on the phone talking over any questions, thoughts and concerns, and they also spend time reviewing updates from prenatal appointments with doctors or midwives—many moms even call their doulas first with questions and concerns (and sometimes to cry or talk out their frustrations or worries) before they might call their medical provider. Of course, doulas make sure to encourage moms to call their providers when appropriate.

Doulas are on-call for moms and their partners 24-hours a day, 7-days a week for the 4-6 weeks before and after the baby’s estimated due date. Doulas also ensure that another doula is available for backup if the primary doula cannot attend a birth (which is very rare).



A husband and doula provide a relaxing foot massage for a mother in labor.

Once mom thinks she’s in labor, she contacts her doula and they talk about coping strategies for early labor. Then, when mom needs extra help, the doula can meet her either at home or at her birth place or hospital.

Doulas offer physical support during labor by massage, applying pressure to the back, offering drinks or food, and suggesting and helping with various positions. While mom’s

partner usually provides the majority of emotional support, a doula can add to that with her empathy and encouragement. Doulas help partners figure out what they can do to help mom in various parts of labor, or doulas give the partner a break to sleep or eat. Partners who experience birth with a doula frequently say that they can’t imagine having a baby without a doula...which is an even more common comment from mothers.

Doulas provide moms and their partners with continuous support throughout labor and birth. This means that doulas don’t have shifts like medical providers do. For example, if you’re in labor for more than 24-hours, your doula will be there with you from the time you decide you need her support in labor, until a couple hours after the baby’s birth. And doulas only sleep if mom sleeps.

Women labor best in a calm and comfortable environment. Creating a calm environment for labor and birth is one of the most important things a doula does for a couple, sometimes without the couple even knowing what she’s doing. For example, tidying up in the bathroom, straightening up mom’s or dad’s bed in a hospital room, fixing the window shades, or changing the room temperature might be acts that go unnoticed, but nevertheless they impact the feeling in the room.

Doulas also bring with them their “doula bag” or “birth bag”, which includes myriad wonderful supplies to help mom feel more comfortable. This bag might include massage tools, lotion, essential oils for aromatherapy, books, and light snacks.

## What About the Traditional *Coaches*?

Is giving birth like a team sport? Let’s pretend, for a minute, that your partner is asked to take a weekend class to learn how to play Australian-rules football. Your partner may have heard of this sport, maybe even seen it once or twice on TV, but he or she has no idea how to play it.

Then further imagine, after only 12 hours of instruction, he or she is asked to coach the team to win a championship. Yes, a few partners may feel ready to do that, and it’s up to you to



A new family is born.

know whether you feel comfortable with them taking on that role independently. Most partners would admit that they’d feel okay maybe being assistant coach, but not to take on the role of head coach for such an important event.

This is a great analogy for what a doula does—a doula fills in where partners don't feel comfortable and help partners know what to do to best help mom during labor. Sometimes partners want to just sit by and observe or rest. If mom is okay with that, then doulas can be the primary support in labor! But ultimately, a doula is another pair of hands, another voice of support and encouragement, and a wise guide through the whole experience.

*What about the nurse?* Many parents expect that nurses will be providing them the necessary support in labor. However, because of the high number of clinical responsibilities nurses have, many nurses admit that they don't have the time to support mothers in the way that they would like to, or in the same way that partners and doulas can. And many nurses don't have the training that doulas do in the best ways to support mothers in labor, since their training was concentrated on medical monitoring and procedures. Ultimately, the more hands and ideas the better—nurses and doulas should work well together and have the same goal: to support a mother and her partner to have a positive birth experience.

Some parents want to create a birth statement or list of birth preferences for their birth. This is sometimes referred to as a "birth plan," but it's important to remember that birth cannot be planned. Having an open mind and being flexible are vital to a satisfying birth. A list of birth preferences is something a doula can help with, so that unnecessary statements are not included, and that important statements are written in such a way that they are succinct and positive, as well as helpful to the medical staff.

Most birth doulas also provide other services as well, such as belly casting, birth photography, referrals to other professionals (chiropractors, homeopaths, massage therapists, postpartum doulas, and lactation consultants). They may also sell supplies for birth or breastfeeding.



A new mother smiles in pure joy after giving birth.

After the baby is born, doulas usually provide one postpartum visit in your home after the birth to see how you are doing, talk about the birth and help with breastfeeding and baby care. Finally, a doula provides all of these services with respect and confidentiality.

Because labors vary in length, and different moms and partners need different support, doulas provide their services based on one flat fee, generally paid when services are

contracted. The cost of a doula varies depending on experience. A doula-in-training often will offer her services for free or at a low cost, but experienced doulas charge from \$500-\$1200 in the Boston area, and generally on the lower side of that scale in the Worcester area. Occasionally, even experienced doulas offer their services at a reduced rate when asked. Most doulas have written contracts which they sign with the mothers and partners so that there is documentation of what services are expected.

"The act of opening yourself up so another being can pass down the channel and out of you takes a woman all the way down to the very deep of living."  
~Judy Grahn

## What Doesn't a Doula Do?

There are a few things that doulas cannot do. Although moms in labor aren't always feeling up to having a conversation, they cannot rely on a doula to speak for them or make decisions for them. A mom's birth is her own. Medical caregivers want to hear from mom, not a doula. Doulas can carefully remind moms of their original birth preferences or diplomatically ask questions of care providers. It's important to realize that birth can be a time of transition and empowerment. Being assertive about one's wishes in birth is one of the first steps to becoming a strong mother ready to assert herself for the benefit of her children.

Birth doulas do not "take over" the birth partner's role of primary support, unless the partner is absent or chooses not to participate in the physical support of labor. A birth doula works with the partner or other labor support persons (family member, friend) to create a *circle of support*. One way to think about it is this: would you rather have two hands giving you a massage or four? Or wouldn't it be wonderful to have someone giving you a massage while someone else is feeding you, giving you something to drink, or filling a bathtub?

Doulas cannot make medical judgments or recommendations. Doulas will only offer information about the available options if asked. Often they provide resources prenatally and during labor that moms and partners can read to help them make informed decisions based on evidence-based research. A doula can discuss your concerns with you, suggest options, and ensure that you have had the opportunity to ask questions and obtain accurate information.

Most doulas do not come with any clinical skills such as

performing vaginal examinations, checking fetal heart tones, assessing vital signs, etc. This is not within the role and scope of a doula. However, occasionally there is a doula who also has training and/or certification in a more clinical field. She may choose to offer her clinical services, but not under the guise of a doula.

## How to Find a Doula

There are several organizations that train and certify birth doulas. The two largest are the Association for Labor Assistants and Childbirth Educators (ALACE), and DONA International (formerly named Doulas of North America). These two organizations list doulas' contact information on their websites: [www.alace.org](http://www.alace.org) and [www.dona.org](http://www.dona.org).

Before choosing a doula, it is wise to talk to several doulas on the phone, decide to meet with two or three of them for a short interview, and ultimately choose the one that you "click" with the most. It is vital for you to feel comfortable with your doula so that you can be honest and open with her at all times. There is no competition among doulas—we strongly believe that women and doulas choose each other, and there must be a gut feeling that they will work well together.

## Another Type of Doula...the Postpartum Doula

In most of the rest of the world, women and their babies are surrounded in birth and after birth, by other women who know how to take care of the new mom and baby, and how to teach the new mom how to take care of her baby. Women in our country tend to be expected to do it all on our own, which really isn't realistic. There are women trained as postpartum doulas, who can be hired by new moms (or second- or third-time moms) to help them at home for several hours or days a week, for several weeks. Whether cooking, tidying up, grocery shopping, helping the mom learn how to breastfeed, or taking care of the baby so mom can get a nap or a shower, postpartum doulas help mom feel much better about themselves and about their mothering skills.



## An Informed Pregnancy, A Good Birth, A Great Beginning

Being informed in pregnancy about your options and evidence-based research and realities helps mothers and their partners prepare for a good birth experience. A good birth experience can be defined as one in which a mother feels that she was listened to, respected, cared for, treated well, and able to participate in decisions affecting her care. A good birth experience gives a mother and her baby a positive start to a long-lasting new phase of life as a family. Many families find that their experience with their doula is so positive that their doula becomes a friend, too. And doulas enjoy receiving updates on how babies are doing, too! It's not unusual for doulas to be present at the births of two or more babies in one family.

What is most important, though, is to explore all your options in pregnancy, birth, and early parenting so that you can decide for yourself what is best for you. If you decide to have a doula, it's very likely you'll find out it was one of the best decisions you've ever made. What a great way to start your new family—by making choices that will make your new phase of life even happier.



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*Thanks to all who gave permission to use their photographs.*

\*Compiled from *Mothering the Mother*, by MH Klaus, JH Kennell, and PH Klaus; Addison Wesley Publishing Company, 1993.

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**For more information on a doula and having a safer and more satisfying pregnancy, birth, and postpartum experience, refer to the excellent resources listed on the following page.**

## **Favorite Resources for Pregnancy, Childbirth, Breastfeeding, Baby Care, and Parenting**

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### **Pregnancy Books**

Harris, A. Christine. *The Pregnancy Journal: A Day to Day Guide to a Healthy and Happy Pregnancy*

Sears, William and Martha. *The Pregnancy Book: Month-by-Month, Everything You Need to Know from America's Baby Experts*

O'Mara, Peggy. *Mothering Magazine's Having a Baby, Naturally: The Mothering Magazine Guide to Pregnancy and Childbirth*

Fields, Alan and Denise. *Baby Bargains*

Northrup, Christiane. *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom*

Somer, Elizabeth. *Nutrition for a Healthy Pregnancy*

Sichel, Deborah, & Jeanne Watson Driscoll. *Women's Moods*

Small, Meredith. *Our Babies, Ourselves*

### **Childbirth Books and Websites**

Gaskin, Ina May. *Ina May's Guide to Childbirth*

Goer, Henci. *The Thinking Woman's Guide to a Better Birth*

Simkin, Penny. *The Birth Partner*

Maternity Center Association  
[www.maternitywise.org](http://www.maternitywise.org)

Coalition to Improve Maternity Services  
[www.motherfriendly.org](http://www.motherfriendly.org)

Lamaze International  
[www.lamaze.org](http://www.lamaze.org)

*What Every Pregnant Woman Needs to Know About Cesarean Section 2004.* An important new booklet from the Maternity Center Association. Download a pdf version at <http://www.maternitywise.org/cesareanbooklet/>

Sears, William. *The Birth Book : Everything You Need to Know to Have a Safe and Satisfying Birth*

England, Pam & Rob Horowitz. *Birth from Within: An Extra-Ordinary Guide to Childbirth Preparation*

### **Breastfeeding Books and Websites**

Newman, Jack, and Pitman, Teresa. *The Ultimate Breastfeeding Book of Answers: The Most Comprehensive Problem-Solution Guide to Breastfeeding from the Foremost Expert in North America*

Behrmann, Barbara. *The Breastfeeding Café: Mothers Share the Joys, Challenges, and Secrets of Nursing*

Nursing Mothers' Council  
Free phone support for breastfeeding/weaning families and reduced rates on Medela breastpumps and some accessories.  
[www.bace-nmc.org](http://www.bace-nmc.org) and 617.244.5102

La Leche League  
Evidence-based information, advice, links, and breastfeeding supplies.  
[www.lalecheleague.org](http://www.lalecheleague.org)

Massachusetts Breastfeeding Coalition  
Two excellent documents to print out before your baby is born: *Making Milk is Easy!* and *Discharge Instructions*. Also includes more evidence-based information, advice, and links.  
[www.massbfc.org](http://www.massbfc.org)

The American Academy of Pediatrics  
2005 Policy Statement: Breastfeeding and the Use of Human Milk  
<http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/reprint/pediatrics;115/2/496.pdf>

The United States Government's Public Service Campaign  
[www.4women.gov/campaigns/breastfeeding](http://www.4women.gov/campaigns/breastfeeding)

The American College of Nurse-Midwives website on breastfeeding  
[www.gotmom.org](http://www.gotmom.org)

Articles by a lactation consultant and researcher  
Kathleen Kendall-Tackett, PhD, IBCLC,  
[www.granitescientific.com](http://www.granitescientific.com)

Helpful and varied information on breastfeeding  
[www.breastfeeding.com](http://www.breastfeeding.com)

Articles by a lactation consultant and researcher  
Linda Smith, BSE, FACCE, IBCLC  
[www.bflrc.com/ljs/lj-arts.htm](http://www.bflrc.com/ljs/lj-arts.htm)

Articles by a pediatrician and expert in breastfeeding  
Jack Newman, MD  
[www.bflrc.com/newman/articles.htm](http://www.bflrc.com/newman/articles.htm)

Articles by various breastfeeding experts  
<http://drjaygordon.com/bf/index.htm>

### **Baby Care Books**

Sears, William and Martha. *The Baby Book*

Karp, Harvey. *The Happiest Baby on the Block : The New Way to Calm Crying and Help Your Newborn Baby Sleep Longer*

Kitzinger, Sheila. *The Year After Childbirth*