

Trust } Birth

A Midwife's Guide For Women Birthing In Hospital During Covid-19

For many women the Covid-19 restrictions have helped them make the decision to have a home birth and others have chosen to freebirth.

This guide is for women birthing in hospital for whatever reason. I have put this guide together because how we are supported during labour and birth matters and at the moment our choices for that support are limited. So here's how you can support yourself when you can't have that support present.

So you've been told your partner will have to wait outside until you're in established labour. That sucks.

They'll have to leave you and baby alone after the birth, and, depending where you birth, may or may not be allowed to visit for short periods afterwards. That sucks more.

For most women their stay in hospital is relatively short. Many Trusts are endeavouring to discharge women as soon as possible and often within 6 - 12 hours, sometimes less. This can still seem a long time for you to be separated from the rest of your newly grown family.

For some women, especially those being induced or who have complications or even just a routine Caesarean section, you can expect to be in hospital on your own for a bit longer.

So how will they know you're in established labour?

When you telephone the triage or labour helpline they will talk to you and ask you how you're doing. They'll ask about your surges/contractions and whether you have any bleeding, how baby is moving (babies move in labour too), whether your waters have broken and of course, whether you or anyone in your household has any symptoms of coronavirus.

From this triage call you will either be invited in for assessment, or be advised to stay at home for a while longer. If you do not feel happy staying at home, or something feels wrong, then don't. Trust your instinct. Insist on going to hospital.

On arrival at the hospital you will most likely have your temperature checked at the door, and be given a mask. If you are in strong labour and stopping to breathe through contractions, the mask is not going to be helpful and you don't need to wear it.

Often a midwife can just recognise when a woman is labouring and/or is highly unlikely to be leaving hospital before the baby is born.

Nearly always, the midwife will offer, yes **offer**, a vaginal examination.

You do not have to have a vaginal examination if you don't want to.

I know it can be an anxious time, and you want your partner to be with you as soon as possible, but you may be more anxious about having an examination. So I'm just telling you, it's ok to decline.

Once the midwife sees or assesses that you are in established labour you will be able to ask your birth partner to join you.

If you are **offered** induction of labour, do your research. Make sure you know why you are being offered induction. Make sure the reasons are evidence based. Make sure you are happy that your baby might be born before they are ready and that the reasons are valid.

If you are being offered induction of labour (most women who reach 40 weeks of pregnancy are) then:

- Join the Induction of Labour group on Facebook.
- Read "Am I Allowed" by AIMS.
- Read Give Birth Like A Feminist by Milli Hill.
- Get the information about how long an induction might take, whether you can go home between stages and if not, why not?

If there is a medical reason for your baby to be born early, ensure you know what the "cut-off date" is and what will happen if the induction is unsuccessful by that date. If there is no cut off date, then question the urgency for induction.

Find out what the stages of induction are in the area where you live.

Make sure you know about what happens once the early stages are done i.e. ARM - artificial rupture of membranes (breaking the waters around your baby), syntocinon/oxytocin (the hormone drip).

Think about whether you want to wait for longer than 2-4 hours after your water has broken to see if you can start labouring without the drip.

Ask about women's experiences of having the drip.

Make sure you know the rates of interventions during birth for women having inductions and particularly the hormone drip - i.e. forceps, ventouse and caesarean section.

Consider all your options for pain relief. If you don't know them - find out.

- * Breathing

- * Movement (may be limited by being monitored electrically - you can choose how you are monitored or even decline monitoring altogether)

- * Hypnobirthing

- * Massage

- * Water - shower/bath/birth pool (and if anyone tells you you can have a bath but not get in a birth pool because it may stall labour then ask them what is the difference!).

- * TENS machine (Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation)

- * Entonox (gas and air)

- * Saline injections

- * Pethidine/Diamorphine

- * Epidural

On the day - call and ask before you go into the hospital whether they are actually able to commence the induction when you arrive or will you have a wait, potentially making your stay there alone longer. If they say there is a wait - consider staying at home until they are ready for you.

Checkout the parking costs. Free parking is over in many Trusts and the cost might shock you - taxis could be cheaper. Some Trusts offer concessions for birthing people.

Leave the baby's bag in the car - your partner can bring it in with them when they come - just pop a nappy and a hat for baby, any cord ties and placenta keeping instructions you may have into your bag - that's all you'll need. This gives you more space to focus on bringing what you want/need.

Think about what you can take with you to help you whilst you are separated from your partner:

- Not all hospital beds will have a socket you can use to charge your phone (your contact with the outside world). Take a power pack as well as your charger.
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- Take your electric toothbrush (fully charged) as well as a normal toothbrush because you'll miss the electric one more than you think.
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- Take a favourite picture of a favourite holiday destination, or of you and your partner or your pets for your bedside locker.
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- Take comfort items, a partner's pyjama top or something that reminds you of him. Take your teddy. Take your pillow. Often there aren't enough pillows.
- Eye mask and ear plugs. The nights are currently long and hospital blinds don't shut out much light. And earplugs - well I don't need to say too much here.
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- Take a throw or blanket if you feel the cold.
- Take a portable fan if you get hot.
- Bring your sports bottle/filter bottle.
- Take change for vending and parking machines - just in case they don't take cards.
- Take lipsalve, face creams and make up if you wish. Maybe a nice hair treatment or a face mask or foot mask.
- Do yourself a manicure.
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- Puzzle books can be good. What about that novel you were planning to read on your holiday that got cancelled due to Covid? You may have many hours just sitting around - why not make the most of them.

If you're there for a few days, try to stick to **your** daily routine whilst waiting to start labour: reading, meditating, walking, watching the programmes that you like to watch. Keep your life as normal as possible or make it as special/relaxing as possible. Catch up with people on the phone. Write letters.

Download your apps, films and box sets and other podcasts and meditations to your devices. Not all hospitals have 3G or 4G or good wifi. Watch films and box sets at the same time as your partner so you can chat about them afterwards and know that you are sharing an experience. Or watch something you know they wouldn't enjoy because you can!

Avoid watching One Born Every Minute at all costs!

Talk to your baby, stroke your bump, take time to connect and deepen that bond. Video your baby moving and share that with your partner.

Whilst in hospital (and before labour!), make plans:

Plans for meals for the weeks after your baby is born. Plans for your first outing (Covid permitting). Make lists - lists of people you can talk to, lists of things you are grateful for and things that you know lift your mood - music, walking, talking, favourite films, tv shows, foods etc for when the going gets tough.

Listen to hypnobirthing tracks - there are lots out there, even if you've never listened to one before it doesn't matter - they will help keep you relaxed.

Eat well. Take delicious snacks and drinks with you.

If you don't enjoy the hospital food it is usually completely fine for people to bring food in for you. Or maybe even go and eat a takeaway in the car or on a bench outside with your partner. You are not a prisoner.

Try not to clock watch. Ask for help, more information, updates, drinks, whatever you need. Be sure you are clear about the plan. Get your partner into the room with you by face-timing or having them on speaker phone during conversations with your care providers.

Remember you can say no to anything you want:

You can say "I would like more time or information to think/discuss/make a decision that is right for me and my family". Or ask them - "what if I do nothing?". If they tell you there isn't time - make sure you understand why.

Practice your breathing exercises during the quiet moments. If you haven't practised any yet, don't worry - there's no reason you can't start now.

Ask the hospital if they provide TENS machines and if so ask for one to be put on as soon as you start having discomfort from tightenings/surges/contractions. TENS machines have a cumulative effect so putting them on early is far better than later. Or borrow one from a friend or hire one.

Oh and if you have a camera then take that too. It's easier to get someone else to take some snaps of your new family and will still work if your phone battery has died.

After the birth give your partner something that the baby has been close to or wrapped in so that they can get used to the baby's smell while they are apart from you. Maybe take a muslin square in with you and ask for the baby to be covered by it while you have that wonderful skin to skin contact.

Offer your partner some skin to skin contact too to help establish that initial bond between them.

After the birth, after your partner has left, look at your baby, hold your baby close, feed your baby and grow that bond between you. Enjoy the moments without other distractions - every moment is precious and goes far too quickly. Relish every one.

Above all, remember that you and your baby are the centre of all this activity. You will work together beautifully to bring your baby earthside 

Catherine x

www.TrustBirth.co.uk