



Photograph by Daisy Day

If the idea of a shorter, less painful labour sounds appealing, then you need to find out about "Active Birth". This article, compiled by Active Birth Taranaki using books and articles written by Janet Balaskas, looks at the benefits of having an active birth, and suggests a variety of positions for an active labour and birth.

An introduction to **ACTIVE BIRTH**

By Janet Balaskas

WHAT IS AN ACTIVE BIRTH?

Active Birth is a term and a philosophy first described by Janet Balaskas. She says Active Birth is nothing new. It is simply a convenient way of describing normal labour and birth and the way that a woman behaves when she is following her own instincts and the physiological logic of her body. It is a way of saying that she herself controls her body while giving birth, rather than being the passive recipient of a birth that is managed by attendants.⁽¹⁾

AN ACTIVE BIRTH IS INSTINCTIVE.

It involves giving birth quite naturally and spontaneously through your own will and determination, having the complete freedom to use your body as you choose and to follow its urges. Active Birth is an attitude of mind. It involves acceptance and trust in the natural function and involuntary nature of the birth process, as well as appropriate positioning of your body.⁽²⁾

Active Birth is more comfortable, safer, and more efficient than a passive 'confinement'. This is supported by the many scientific studies comparing women who are active in labour with those in a passive, recumbent position.⁽²⁾

By deciding to have an Active Birth you will be reclaiming your fundamental power as a birth-giver, a mother and a woman. You will also be giving your baby the best possible start in life and a safe transition from the womb to the world. Should an unusual difficulty or complication arise, you will be free to make use of the safety net of modern obstetric care, knowing that you have done your very best and also knowing that this is your choice and that the intervention was really necessary. In this way, even the most difficult birth can be a positive experience.⁽²⁾

THE BENEFITS OF ACTIVE BIRTH

When you are free to move and choose comfortable, supported, upright positions in labour such as standing, walking, kneeling, sitting or squatting, there are a number

of significant advantages. This is an area of childbirth which has been well researched.⁽³⁾

THE ADVANTAGES OF REMAINING UPRIGHT:⁽¹⁾

GRAVITY ASSISTS uterine contractions and bearing-down efforts. When upright, the mother's body is in harmony with the downward pull of gravity. When lying down, her involuntary efforts to expel the baby are inhibited; she must strain harder to push the baby uphill, and she is more likely to require the assistance of forceps or vacuum extraction.

LESS EFFORT IS DEMANDED of the uterus. Since the uterus tilts forward during a contraction, a mother can lean forward and assist her uterus to work without resistance. When she is lying down, her uterus must work harder and less efficiently.

IT IS EASIER FOR the baby's head to enter the mother's pelvis when she is upright, and provides the baby with the best angle of descent, in relation to gravity, through the pelvic canal.

PLACENTAL CIRCULATION IS IMPROVED, giving the baby a better supply of oxygen.

The nerves that supply the pelvis and the uterus arise from the lower part of the spinal cord and enter through the sacrum. When there is no direct pressure on the nerves, **LESS PAIN IS FELT**.

AS LONG AS the mother is upright, the pelvic joints are free to expand, move, and adjust to the shape of the baby's descending head. The coccyx is designed to swivel backwards to widen the outlet of the pelvis as the baby emerges. This is impossible if the mother is sitting on her tailbone in the classic position for pushing used by many childbirth education methods (also called the sitting squat or semi-reclining).

WHEN A MOTHER IS UPRIGHT, her perineal tissues can expand evenly and pull back around the baby's emerging head, significantly decreasing the need for an episiotomy.⁽¹⁾

IN SUMMARY, THE MAIN BENEFITS OF AN ACTIVE BIRTH ARE:

- Less pain
- More oxygen to your baby during labour & birth
- Optimal positioning & maximum space for your baby
- More effective contractions
- Easier to push
- Less risk of tearing
- You and your baby in optimal condition after birth
- Bonding and breastfeeding facilitated⁽³⁾

PREPARATION IN PREGNANCY

Some women, left to themselves, will instinctively know what to do in labour, but most of us, having no example to follow, need to be made aware of the possibilities of using various upright positions in order to discover our instincts. This can easily be done by practicing during your pregnancy the birth positions and movements that are most appropriate and comfortable. Yoga-based exercises will lead you towards your own instincts for labour and birth, while cultivating the right and natural body habits for a healthy pregnancy.⁽²⁾

ACTIVE BIRTH AT HOME OR HOSPITAL⁽²⁾

You will probably be asked to choose the place of birth right at the beginning of your pregnancy, and you may be

expected to stay committed to your original choice. But it is not always easy to decide at this time, as you may not know very much about the whole subject, or the options available. Certainly you will not yet know how the pregnancy is to progress, which must influence your final choice. Women, like other mammals, have a powerful 'nesting instinct', which usually arises towards the end of the pregnancy. Just as a cat chooses her corner of the house before the kittens are due to arrive, you too may not know where you wish to give birth until closer to the end, though you may have some idea of the kind of setting you would prefer.

When you begin your prenatal care with your midwife or doctor, keep open all your options for the birth. In the meantime, explore the possibilities. You may wish to change your midwife for the remainder of your pregnancy, or to choose a hospital that may not be your nearest because you like its approach. It is advisable to pay a visit to any hospital you are considering before committing yourself, to find out about the general approach in the labour ward and whether the staff encourages activity during labour and upright positions for birth. Also find out what happens after the birth, and how long you will be expected to stay before you can go home with your baby. You might prefer to explore the other options available. Remember: you are always entitled to change your mind.

There is no way of removing every risk in childbirth. Although the vast majority of babies are born safely, the final outcome of any birth is always uncertain. Unexpected complications can arise, machines can break down; anyone can make a mistake. There is now plenty of evidence that in general it is as safe, if not safer, to have a baby at home as to have it in the hospital, and home usually provides the best conditions for a physiological birth. But different factors, such as your health, your proximity to a hospital, and whether you have any problems in pregnancy, will help to determine the most appropriate place of birth.

The most important thing is to discover all the possibilities, to consider what your priorities are, and then to make a choice that feels right for you. Your instinctive feelings are really important, and they will arise most strongly at the end of your pregnancy.⁽²⁾

SUGGESTED POSITIONS FOR LABOUR & BIRTH

FIRST STAGE:

WALKING OR STANDING - shortens the labour and increases the efficiency of contractions. In the early part of the first stage, try to walk around, leaning forward for contractions. You may want to use a wall for support, or let yourself hang onto someone as they support most of your weight during contractions.

SQUATTING - the most physiologically efficient position for labour and birth. Squatting opens the pelvis, "Your pelvis is at its most open, gravity is helping, and contractions are intensified due to increased pressure from the baby's head on the cervix." (Balaskas, 1992) Remember to rest completely between contractions using a stool, the support of another person, a firm cushion, etc. so that you are not tired out from squatting.

SITTING - UPRIGHT, on a chair, a bed, on the floor. The contractions are not as intense as in squatting, but are still aided by gravity. Some women find that sitting on the toilet is most comfortable. It allows a place for the dripping of amniotic fluid, and it leaves the pelvic floor free. In addition, it allows women to relax their pelvic floor

HOT TIPS

FOR HOSPITAL BIRTHS

- A hospital birth can be an active birth.
- Write a clear birth plan with your LMC before you go into labour, stating your preferences about issues like pain relief, positions for the birth, cord clamping & delivery of the placenta and Vit. K.
- Stay at home until you really feel you need to go to hospital. During early labour, time will pass more quickly at home with familiar distractions.
- When you get to hospital, make yourself at home! Bring things with you to make the experience more homely, such as music/cd player; your own pillow or blanket; snacks and drinks for you and your partner; something for your partner to do in the early stages (a book, magazine, cards, crosswords etc).
- Don't feel confined to the bed, or even the labour room. Make use of all the facilities on offer, especially if you are there early in labour (perhaps because you are induced). Feel free to walk around the hospital grounds, pop into the cafeteria, watch TV in the lounge, walk up and down the corridor (the railings are great for leaning on during contractions), and labour in the spa bath.
- You can take a portable birth pool to the hospital (see the waterbirth section for more details).
- Create your own 'nest' to birth in – the hospital bed is not your only option! Ask the midwife about using a swiss ball or putting a mattress and pillows or beanbags on the floor. Keep the lights dim and the room warm. Ask that no-one disturb you.
- Remember to have your baby car seat with you – if things go well, you may want to go home within a few hours of the birth.

more completely because of the association of sitting on the toilet with letting go.

KNEELING - many women find this position the most comfortable in the last part of the first stage, 6 to 10 cm dilation, including transition. This can be done sitting backward on a chair, on the toilet, a bean-bag chair, or a pile of pillows. Some women also use some sort of rocking or rhythmic motion while kneeling. This position is good for posterior babies that are causing their mothers a great deal of back pain. The swiveling of the hips can help encourage the baby to turn.

TRANSITION:

KNEELING - see above.

KNEE-CHEST - this position is useful for women who are not completely dilated (who have a lip of cervix). This position brings the baby forward and reduces pressure on the cervix. Moving the hips through a contraction will help the woman progress to full dilation within a few contractions.

SECOND STAGE:

SUPPORTED SQUATTING - makes optimum use of gravity, so is the most efficient position for rapid descent of baby. Can use one or two supporters or a chair.

KNEELING OR ALL-FOURS - an ideal position if second stage has been very fast. If baby is posterior, can relieve backache.

SIDE-LYING - can be useful position for birth because it leaves the tailbone free to move. Since it doesn't allow for gravity to help, it should not be used if second stage is slow.

BEYOND THE BIRTH⁽³⁾

Most women who have an Active Birth feel very pleased, satisfied and proud of themselves whether it was a physiological birth or not, and recover very quickly. At the end of the day it is a great achievement to bring a new baby into the world, however it needs to happen.

However, if the birth was far more difficult than anticipated, or if there were complications, some women feel disappointed

that reality did not meet their expectations. Sometimes it is beyond our power to influence the progress or outcome of a birth.

When this happens, feeling some disappointment is fair enough. It's important to go through these natural feelings, however this should not go on too long and generally the excitement and challenge of looking after your new baby will soon put these feelings behind you. Occasionally when this is not the case, some counseling or debriefing may be needed to come to terms with what happened.

Birth is unpredictable and it's always best to keep your priorities in perspective. Never let the birth become more important than the baby. At the end of the day what matters most to all of us is the safety and well-being of mother and baby. If your birth is difficult, your birth attendants can try their best to maintain the spirit of an Active Birth and may advise medical care if needed, possibly in combination with supported upright positions.

The best part of having a baby is during the magical first hours and days after the birth, when labour is over and you are getting to know your new baby. For the mother, having an Active Birth can be very empowering. Many women feel afterwards that it was one of the most satisfying and rewarding experiences they have ever had. Both you and your baby are likely to feel very well once you have recovered from the birth and you deserve to have a sense of joy and pride in your achievement." ⁽³⁾

SOURCES:

This article was compiled by Active Birth Taranaki Inc., using extracts from the following sources:

(1) Janet Balaskas, 1991, *New Active Birth*

(2) Janet Balaskas, 1992, *Active Birth: The New Approach to Giving Birth Naturally*

(3) www.activebirthcentre.com

Janet Balaskas is the founder of the Active Birth Movement. She is well known for her work as a birth activist, lecturer and campaigner; and for a wide range of ground-breaking books on childbirth. She established the Active Birth Centre in London, which operates the website www.activebirthcentre.com.

Photograph by Matt Loveridge

