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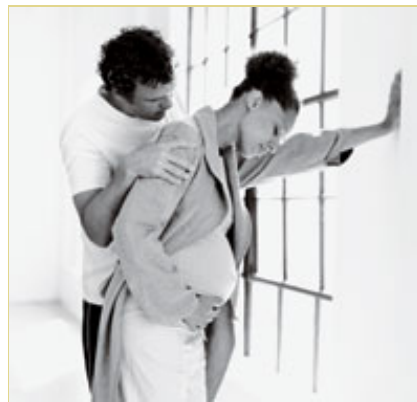
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## Just the Facts, Mom



## Reality Check

**What you learn in childbirth class and what happens during labor can differ greatly. Here are eight things you should know.**

*By Carole Anderson Lucia*

When I was pregnant, I did everything I could to guarantee a perfect delivery. I exercised, read extensively about labor, took classes. I even wrote a birth plan. But as soon as that first contraction hit, my well-laid plans began to disintegrate. Gradual onset of labor? My contractions hit every three minutes from the beginning. No medical intervention? I had every imaginable device hooked up to every conceivable part of my body. No epidural? After 18 hours of labor, I was begging for the anesthesiologist. And the whole ordeal culminated in a Cesarean section. Sure, I was disappointed. But you know what? My baby was healthy.

As it turns out, this divergence between expectations and reality is exceedingly common. "Every woman leaves childbirth class with visions of what her labor will be like," says Elizabeth Stein, M.S.N., M.P.H., a certified nurse-midwife in New York City. "But the expectation is very rarely the reality." To help you prepare for the twists and turns having a baby can take, here are some things you probably won't learn in childbirth class.

**1. Labor hurts.** We don't mean to frighten you, but labor pains are, um, painful, and it's important to realize this before you start having them. "Society does pregnant women a great disservice by not acknowledging the pain of childbirth," says Gilbert J. Grant, M.D., an anesthesiologist specializing in labor and delivery at New York University Medical Center and the author of *Enjoy Your Labor: A New Approach to Pain Relief for Childbirth* (Russell Hastings Press, 2005). If they aren't mentally prepared, Grant adds, women can experience a high level of stress and fear--which some experts say may slow down labor. But you will get through it, just as millions of women have before you. And luckily, there are more pain-relief options than ever--from epidurals and other analgesics to more "alternative" approaches such as water birth and hypnosis.

**2. The thinking on epidurals may be changing.** Some childbirth classes maintain that an epidural can put you or your baby at risk for complications. On the contrary, Grant says, it actually can be better for both of you. Here's why: Pain can trigger your body to release epinephrine, which



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constricts blood vessels and leads to reduced blood flow to the placenta--and, therefore, the baby. "Take the pain away, and the baby gets more blood," he says. Second, if you're in excruciating pain, you can't assist as much during delivery--and a controlled delivery is better for the baby. Getting an epidural can even help you afterward. "There's increasing evidence that severe pain during childbirth leads to increased risk of postpartum depression," Grant says.

**3. You may lose all decorum.** Sharon Harkey, a former labor-and-delivery nurse and now a certified nurse-midwife at Pacific Coast Women's Health in Encinitas, Calif., says most women hunker down and concentrate so hard during labor that modesty is thrown out the window. "You walk in the door with your gown closed," she says, "and by the time you're pushing, the janitor could pull up a lawn chair with popcorn and you wouldn't care." Karen Cordova, a mother of four in Fallbrook, Calif. (with another on the way), can attest to this. "I'm usually a pretty private person," she says, "but during one of my labors I got up to go to the bathroom with my rump hanging out of the gown. My husband, Terry, ran after me and tried to close it behind me -- I yelled at him to get away and almost punched him." Which brings us to our next point...

**4. Your evil twin could emerge.** Many women (not to mention their partners) are surprised by a personality change during labor. "You could be the most laid-back person in the world and become a raving lunatic," Harkey says.

**5. Your husband may not be that useful.** In fact, he may be useless. "A partner can create as much stress as he alleviates," Stein says. "First off, he's never seen his wife hurt, bleed or vomit. Plus, the delivery room has to be warm for the baby, so he might get hot and clammy and start feeling sick. No matter how strong some husbands try to be, they're freaked." What will help, Stein says, is making sure that he is as prepared and informed (and encouraged) as possible. If you still have doubts about his performance, other experts suggest hiring a doula or having a friend in the wings.

**6. You may not instantly fall in love with your baby.** For some women, bonding can take a little time, especially if they had a difficult labor. For example, Harkey says, "If a woman had to have an unplanned C-section, she may feel a sense of loss and disappointment." But usually within a few hours, the emotional floodgates open.

**7. You might be bored.** If you get an epidural and it takes awhile for labor to progress (1 centimeter per hour is a very approximate timeline), you and your partner may find yourselves with time on your hands and not much to do. (If you don't get an epidural, you'll be busy managing the pain.) So bring some books or board games. Another good time-filler: sleep. When it comes time to push, you'll be glad you did.

**8. The real labor begins when you bring your baby home.** No matter how difficult or easy giving birth is for you, it's nothing compared with the physical and emotional toll that having a new baby takes. "The relentless cycle of caring for a baby sent me into a quiet panic," says Lu Hanessian, a mother of two in Cherry Hill, N.J., and author of *Let the Baby Drive: Navigating the Road of New Motherhood* (St. Martin's Press, 2004). "I felt so small, so raw, so vulnerable. The unexpected shock of sleep deprivation mixed with profound love knocked the wind out of me. "There's no epidural for motherhood," Hanessian adds. "The low lows and the high highs--you feel them all." But boy, is it worth it.

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