



Relaxation Basics

Relaxation

Relaxation is one of the most effective tools for coping with labor.

You can reduce pain and conserve energy by not tightening muscles during labor. You feel more comfortable and in control when you focus on relaxing rather than focusing on the intensity of the contractions. Most importantly, staying relaxed prevents the hormonal stress response. This “fight or flight” response and the hormones associated with it slow the progress of labor. It can also make the contractions more painful. To prevent the stress response, it is important to relax between contractions. Even though you may not be able to stay completely relaxed *during* contractions, your ability to rest *between* contractions will help your body work more efficiently.

The Relaxing Breath

You may want to use a slow, deep breath as a signal to relax. Take in a comfortable breath. Then, let it out while relaxing your whole body. Taken at the beginning of a contraction, this slow breath may help you relax into the contraction rather than against it. At the end of a contraction, repeating this breath signals that you can rest until the next contraction begins. You can take a relaxing breath any time you feel your body getting tense.

Positions

To help you get and stay relaxed, it is important to get into a comfortable position. Explore various positions during pregnancy and change positions as often as necessary when you are in labor.

With a good relaxation position, your body has gentle curves and is supported by pillows, stable furniture or your labor partner. No part of your body lies right on another. You are not lying flat on your back. When you lie flat, your uterus receives less blood and your baby receives less oxygen.

Types of Relaxation

One approach to relaxation is to focus on your muscle tension and consciously release that tension. The release of muscular tension leads to a sense of peacefulness.

Contract/Release

This is a good way to get to know when your muscles are relaxed. Think about how each muscle feels when you tighten it and then when you release it. Start with your toes and move up toward your head. Tighten muscle groups one at a time: feet, lower legs, knees, upper legs, belly, chest, arms, shoulders, neck and face each time you breathe in. Release them one at a time with each breath out.



Types of Relaxation

Progressive Relaxation:

Select a muscle group (for example, arms) and tighten, then relax. Continue this with face, arms, abdomen, legs and feet. After you can tell whether or not muscles are relaxed, try to relax your muscles without first tensing. Start again with your head/face, and focus on the small groups of muscles. Release these muscles with each exhaling breath. Move down your body until you are completely relaxed.

Touch Relaxation:

Your partner can use the warmth and gentle pressure of his/her hand to help your muscles relax. Your partner should keep the touch firm but gentle and keep at least one hand on your body at all times during the relaxation exercise. Their hands should stroke outward from the center of your body. It may also help to think of your partner's touch as a sponge that can wash away your tension.

Because relaxation is more than released muscle tension, you can also get relaxed by focusing on your inner state. This is often called *mindfulness*. When you calm your mind, your muscles also relax. You can use any method of mindfulness that works for you.

Imagery:

Imagine a comfortable, relaxed time like lying on the warm sand of a beach or floating in the water. Enjoy the feelings that come from remembering how your body felt. Use your own favorite place, and try adding smells (aromatherapy) or sounds (from your playlists) to enhance this experience. There are also smartphone apps to help with guided imagery.



Meditation, Tai Chi and Yoga:

Whether using mindful meditation or yoga, choose a quiet, secluded location so you can relax without distractions or interruptions. Find a comfortable position, where all of your body is well supported. Many suggest not using a lying down position, as this may lead to you falling asleep. You can sit on a chair or on the floor in the lotus position. Select a point of focus, either a visual (such as a photo or flame from a candle) or concentrate with your eyes closed. You may feel a variety of emotions—just let them go. And you may feel distracted with thoughts—also just let them go. You might add relaxing music or use a meditation timer app for your smart device.

Before assuming yoga positions, consult with a prenatal yoga instructor or Tai Chi instructor and your care provider.



The Golden Boat Visualization

Here is some relaxation imagery you can use to calm the mind and relax the body.

Take a minute to get comfortable. Shift your position or rearrange your pillows so that all of your body feels support.

Then close your eyes and focus on your breathing. Take a couple of full, slow breaths. Release whatever tension you can with each exhale. After the third breath, imagine a small, beautiful lake. Its blue water sparkles in the sunshine.



On the shore of the lake is an enormous tree. There, you will find a golden boat. The boat is just the right size for you. It is filled with soft cushions. Step into the boat and settle yourself on the cushions. Your whole body feels supported and comfortable.

When you are ready, imagine the boat slowly drifting out from the shade of the tree, slowly drifting out into the sunlight.

First, the sunlight is just on your head and neck. It warms your face and melts all of the tension around your eyes and mouth. Enjoy the warmth on your face. Your skin feels smooth. Let your head settle further into the pillows.

Feel the sunlight warm your shoulders and arms, easing any tension there. Feel the spaces between your fingers as your hands open to the sun.

Breathe in the calmness of the clean air. Breathe out the tension you are holding in your body. Let the sun warm your chest and hips, dissolving any aches or tiredness.

As the boat drifts out into full sunlight, enjoy the soothing warmth on your legs and feet. Stretch and reposition them if you would like. Your whole body feels fluid and relaxed.

Enjoy the gentle breeze as it flows over your body, keeping you just the right temperature. Feel the gentle motion of the boat as it floats on the lake. Enjoy the peace and stillness.

When you are ready to return, the boat will drift back to the shore.

When you get out of the boat, you will feel rested and refreshed.

You can come back to your golden boat whenever you wish. It is always there waiting for you.

Positions To Try During Relaxation



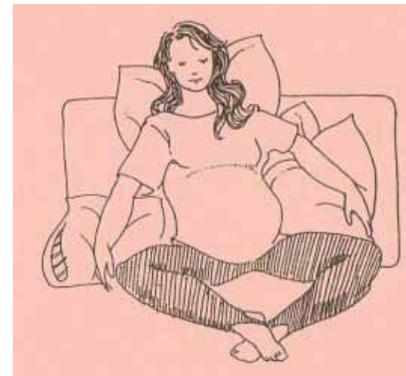
Side-lying Lie on your left side with a pillow between your knees and another under your head. You can put other pillows under your belly and between your arms.

3/4 side-lying From a side-lying position, roll more toward your belly and rest your lower arm along your side. You can put pillows under your belly, chest and head.



Lounge chair Sit in a semi-reclining position with knees bent and your arms and knees supported by pillows. You can also recline in a warm bath.

Tailor sitting or modified lotus sitting Sit with your knees bent and feet close to each other. Lean back against a support. You can also lean forward with your back rounded and your elbows resting on your knees.



Standing Stand with your knees slightly bent. Let your partner or stable furniture support your weight.