

Backache in Labor

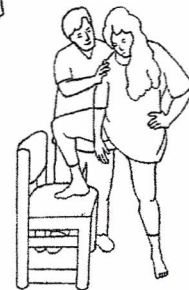
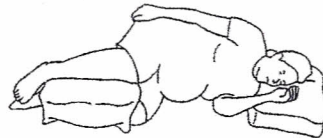
by Penny Simkin, PT, CD(DONA)

One woman in four feels intense backache during labor contractions. Such "back labor" may be due to the position of the baby's head or the shape of the woman's pelvis or her spinal flexibility. Relaxation and breathing are not enough to cope with such pain. Here are some suggestions for additional ways to deal with backache during labor.

A. Use positions and movements to encourage the baby into a favorable position, speed a labor that has slowed down, or relieve back pain..

Positions and Movements.

- a. **Sidelying.** Lying on her side with both hips and knees flexed, and a pillow between her knees.
- b. **Semi-prone.** Lying on her side with her lower arm behind or in front of her and her lower leg out straight she flexes her upper hip and knee, rests her knee on a doubled-up pillow and rolls toward her front.
- c. Also, she can spend time on her **hands and knees**, or **kneeling and leaning forward** with her upper body on a chair or a birth ball (a large physical therapy ball). Some labor beds can be arranged to support her in this position.
- d. **Pelvic Rocking.** While kneeling and leaning forward, she rocks her pelvis forward and back, or in a circle. This helps dislodge the baby within her pelvis, encouraging rotation.
- e. **Standing and walking** take advantage of gravity in encouraging descent of the baby.
- f. **Slow dancing** (standing and swaying side to side while being embraced by her partner) helps.
- g. **The Lunge.** Standing and facing forward, place a chair beside her. She places one foot on the chair seat, with her knee and foot pointing to the side while she faces forward. Remaining upright, she slowly "lunges," or leans sideways, toward the chair, so that she bends the knee of the leg on the chair for a slow count of 5 then returns to upright. She should continue through the contraction and try lunging in each direction, and stick with the direction that is most comfortable.
- h. **Abdominal Lifting.** While standing, she interlocks the fingers of her hands and places them underneath her belly against her pubic bone. During the contractions, she lifts her abdomen up and slightly in, while bending her knees. This often relieves back pain while improving the position of her baby in her pelvis.



- j. The **Open Knee-Chest** position may help reposition an OP baby if used during very early labor. If she has frequent irregular painful contractions causing back pain, and her cervix is not dilating, try this. Be sure her buttocks is high in the air (see illustration). She remains in that position for 30 to 45 minutes. The back pain often disappears in this position.



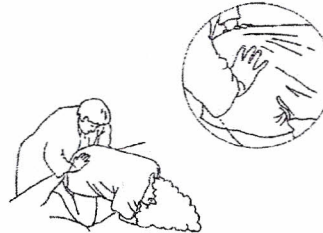
B. Comfort measures for the doula or birth partner to use. These can be used with the above positions and movements to help reduce back pain.

1. **Counterpressure.** Holding the front of her hip with one hand (to help her maintain balance) press steadily and firmly (with your fist or the heel of your hand) in one spot in the low back or buttocks area. She will help you know what spot to press—it varies from woman to woman and within the same labor. Try pressing in several places and she will tell you when you have found it.



You usually have to press very hard during every contraction. This is very helpful in coping with the back pain. Between contractions you might massage the area or use cold or hot compresses, described below.

2. **The Double Hip Squeeze.** The mother kneels and leans forward (or on hands and knees). From behind, press on both sides of her buttocks with the palms of your hands. Apply pressure toward the center (pressing her hips together). Experiment to find the right places to press. Do this during contractions. Apply as much pressure as she needs.



3. **Cold or Warm Compresses.** Place an ice pack, hot water bottle, cold or hot wet towel, frozen folded wet washcloth, or silica gel pack on the low back between contractions to relieve back pain. Cold usually is more effective, because of its numbing effects. *Before applying a cold pack*, be sure she is warm. If her hands, feet or nose are cold, wrap her in a warm blanket and put socks on before applying the cold pack. *Also, be sure there are one or more layers of cloth between her skin and the cold or hot pack*, so that she will feel a gradual increase in cold or warmth. Do not place warm or cold items on any area affected by an epidural.



4. **Shower or Bath.** Direct the shower against her low back. It helps immensely. Both baths and showers are very relaxing and may help a great deal with back pain.



5. **Rolling Pressure Over the Low Back.** A rolling pin, a hollow rolling pin filled with ice, or a can of frozen juice or cold soda pop (keep a six pack in a bowl of ice, so you'll always have a cold can) rolled over her low back is soothing during or between contractions. Since such tools are rarely available in the hospital, you might bring them in, especially if she is having back labor at home.