

A doula's perspective on how to avoid unnecessary medical intervention during labour and birth

Intervention. I'm sure no one plans to have a birth plagued by unnecessary medical intervention, but sometimes it just happens. One thing leads to another, which leads to another and pretty soon your birth is no longer your own. Don't get me wrong – I'm all for intervention when it's required, that's what our excellent obstetricians are there for. But in a lot of cases intervention happens for reasons other than medical ones.

A typical scenario is the slightly overdue mom who accepts an induction because there's a bed, her in-laws are in town and everyone is anxious to meet her baby. Maybe she's concerned the beds will be all taken when she does go into labour and she doesn't want to give birth in triage. Next thing she knows her membranes are ruptured (to speed things up), but now she is on a time limit to have the baby. She is told she can't have a bath because her membranes are ruptured and they are concerned about the risk of infection. Nothing much is happening so the pitocin IV is started and now she needs to be continually monitored so movement is restricted. Pretty soon her labour kicks in so hard and fast she is unable to cope and needs pain relief. One thing leads to another, which leads to another... In retrospect she'll say she wishes she had let nature take its course and it might have been a different experience.

Having said all of that it is important to note – the medical staff do not go out of their way to ruin your experience or intervene when it's not necessary. But from their perspective, caring for a patient means that they should be *doing* something to help. Sometimes leaving the mom alone is the best way to do that and maybe that hasn't occurred to them. Or it's entirely possible they are not used to seeing a woman going through a natural labour, and they mistake your birth noises for distress. If that is the case, communicate your needs to them in a friendly manner. They do want you to have a positive experience and only have the best interests of you and your baby at heart.

In the three years I've been working as a doula, I've had the privilege of attending births in all three Calgary hospitals and homebirths too. When asked how to avoid unnecessary intervention I always suggest three things:

- 1) Stay at home as long as you can and have someone experienced in childbirth with you to support you there – a relative, friend or a doula. You will be SO much more comfortable in your own surroundings and will make more progress there. The further along your labor is when you arrive at the hospital, the less there is to intervene with. Please note if your water has broken and/or it is not clear you will need to be in touch with your health care provider. Also if you have any concerns about yourself or your baby, trust your instinct and go to the hospital if you feel you need to. You can always come home again if your labor is in the early stages.
- 2) TRUST your body and its innate ability to birth your baby. Birth is a very intuitive activity and if you don't trust your body you will be much

more likely to accept intervention. As Ina May Gaskin would say “Your body is not a lemon”.

- 3) If you are faced with medical intervention ask good questions that will enable you to make a truly informed decision. Remember it is YOUR birth and you always have the right to take time to make a decision and/or refuse to accept intervention. The hospital staff are very good at letting you know if your situation is truly a medical emergency.

One thing that always strikes me is the issue of informed consent. Often moms are presented with an option that makes sense, but they are not told how it will change their care. Most people are unaware that having a pitocin induction/augmentation means that the mom will “have to be” continually monitored, and therefore movement is fairly restricted. So now comfort techniques like taking a shower or walking the hallways are off limits. Sitting on the ball at the bedside is about all the mom can do. Also if you think about the shape of a pregnant mom’s abdomen it’s not surprising that the monitor belt for the baby’s heartbeat keeps slipping down, especially if she’s trying to remain upright at the bedside. Because the medical staff needs to keep an eye on how the baby is doing, they might suggest an internal fetal monitor which clips into baby’s scalp and provides a reliable reading.

When it comes to pain relief, most people don’t realize that a “walking” epidural is not what it seems. You MAY be able to shuffle, assisted, back and forth to the bathroom, but that’s about it. Once you request an epidural for pain relief, the rest of your first stage of labour is pretty much a passive event.

There is a time and a place for all of these interventions, but if you and your baby are both doing fine then it should be buyer beware. Please do yourself a favor and ask what comes along with the suggested course of action. Here is a list of tips to avoid unnecessary medical intervention in your birth.

- * Trust your body. Millions of years of evolution have provided your body with all of the tools you need to give birth normally.
- * Surround yourself with people who provide comfort measures, good information, positive words and other support. Don’t invite Aunt Martha along because she wants to be there. Ask yourself who do YOU want to have with you.
- * If you are having your baby in a hospital, stay at home as long as possible and have someone there with you who can judge when a good time to leave is.
- * Avoid disturbances – such as noise, procedures or people you are uncomfortable with. Remember it is YOUR birthing space and you will make the most progress when you are feeling comfortable in your surroundings.
- * Stay upright and let gravity be your friend. Keep moving – let your body be your guide.

- * Use nipple stimulation before and after birth – it helps circulate your own natural labor stimulator oxytocin.
- * Delay or avoid pain medications if possible.
- * Be informed and prepared.
- * Have trust and confidence in your caregivers and choice of birth setting.
- * Keep your environment calm, peaceful and conflict free.
- * Avoid intrusive, painful and disruptive procedures.
- * Don't try to "think" your way through labour – it is an instinctive process led by the primitive part of your brain. Let go of control and let your body take over.
- * When medical support may be necessary, ask good questions so you may make informed decisions –
 - Why is this necessary?
 - What is involved?
 - What are the risks involved?
 - Are there any alternatives?
 - What happens if we do nothing/wait an hour/day etc?
 - How will this change my care?
- * If after all of this you do need medical intervention don't beat yourself up. Trust that this is the way your baby needs to be born and be satisfied that you have done everything that you could. There is such a thing as *necessary* medical intervention and after all, what everyone wants is a healthy baby and a healthy mom. Good luck.

Helpful websites

www.dona.org

www.maternitywise.org

www.calgarydoulas.ca

www.hipmamas.ca

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