

What Do Doulas Deliver?



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An overview of an ancient childbirth practice that is becoming increasingly popular today.
By Judi Fitts

A doula supports women and their families in having the childbirth experience they desire while providing emotional, physical, and informational support. Here, a doula shares an overview of this ancient childbirth practice that is becoming increasingly popular.

When I tell people I am a Birth Doula, the usual response is: "Doula? What's a doula?"

Even after I reply that a birth doula is someone who provides comfort and support to a woman giving birth, I still get puzzled looks. "Are you a midwife?" they invariably ask.

The confusion is completely understandable. The term doula has only been used since the 1970's; however, what it stands for is ancient.

"Doula" is a Greek word that, roughly translated, means a woman in service of another woman. In many cultures, it was customary for a laboring woman to be attended by other women in her family and community. It is only recently that Dads have been included in this role and invited into the labor room. And not only has he been invited, he has been given an enormous job! With, at most, six to ten hours of childbirth classes, Dad is expected to provide uninterrupted and unconditional emotional and physical support, guidance and advocacy to the woman he loves. And the job is largely his alone. Yikes! That's a tremendous load for anyone's shoulders!

Why Do I Need a Doula?

The birthing process can be a transformative and enlightening experience. When we surround ourselves with loving, caring people who support our own, innate process of birthing, we have the greatest opportunity to experience childbirth as an empowering and positive life event. We may still find labor to be a difficult experience, but we may be surprised at our capacity for endurance and acceptance when the process takes place in a supportive environment.

A doula provides that constant supportive presence through the labor and delivery process. Most people will tell you that they only saw their doctor in time to catch the baby, or that the doctor popped her head in for a moment here or there, but never stayed for more than a quick check in.

And while it is true that in most cases a midwife will be present for longer periods during a woman's labor, a midwife can get busy, too, if she is tending to more than one client. However, if you are her only laboring client, she will likely be with you for most of your labor. Trouble is, you can't count on that.

And nurses today are busier than ever. They almost always tend to more than one patient at a time and have a whole host of other responsibilities that can distract them from being with you for long. And when they are with you, they're busy monitoring your labor and making notes in your chart. Even though they may have the inclination, they simply don't have the time to offer much hands-on care

Enter the doula. She's professionally trained and may even be certified in labor support. But, she does not use any medical skills, does not offer medical advice and does not deliver the baby—which is what makes her different from a midwife. She may have

personal experience with birthing her own children. She is caring and compassionate, yet emotionally detached from both the mother and her partner. She is knowledgeable about a variety of laboring and birthing matters and is available to discuss the pros and cons of advice from the medical staff. She does not make decisions for the mother nor does she speak to the staff directly about the mother's wishes. Rather, she reminds the mother of her birth plan and asks her questions that empower her to be her own best advocate.

The same doula typically stays with the couple throughout the labor and for the first hour or two after birth. During that time she usually witnesses more than one shift change of the medical staff. As everyone else comes and goes, the doula remains a constant presence for the couple. When the intensity of labor increases, the doula is there to suggest new positions or activities to assist the progression of labor and help the mother feel as comfortable as possible. When Mom is feeling scared and feels she can't go on, the doula is right there to provide reassurance and instill confidence that all is well. She is also there to provide massage (to both Mom and Dad!), apply counter-pressure to Mom's back when needed, get food for the couple, stay with Mom while Dad goes for a walk . . . and do anything else that supports the birth process.

A Dad's Perspective on Doulas

Don, a first-time dad from a Boston suburb, felt misgivings when his wife Carol first suggested they use a doula. "My initial reaction was: I can take care of my wife. But then the reality set in and I realized that there were so many questions I couldn't answer. There was so much going on in her body. How could I really know how to help her?"

Don felt the pressure lift as he gradually welcomed the idea of using a doula. "I felt relief from the stress and anticipation I was feeling. Now I could focus on supporting my wife the way I knew how. I didn't have to ask myself any more, 'Can I handle this?'"

Mom's Point of View

Carol knew she wanted the extra support from the start. "I had a lot of fear about giving birth and knew I needed help with this. I was confident all of our medical bases were covered—we'd been to class, read all the books and asked all the technical questions. Once we met our doula, I felt so much more comfortable. Here was someone who really understood my perspective and wasn't just focusing on the medical facts and figures."

"Being able to call for support as my due date approached was so helpful, too. Friends just weren't knowledgeable about some of my concerns and didn't have the birth experience and perspective that a doula does."

How Do Midwives Feel About Doulas?

Ann Abbott is a certified nurse midwife in practice in Waltham, Massachusetts. "Working with a doula reminds me of why I became a midwife in the first place," says Ann. "Now, I have to be so focused on decision-making and the health of the baby that I don't always have the time to tend to the woman's emotional care. A doula focuses on providing the comforts that I am continually distracted from."

Do Doulas just help with childbirth?

There are two types of doulas: birth doulas and postpartum doulas. A birth doula supports a woman in labor. A postpartum doula provides physical and emotional support to the mom and her baby once they are home. The postpartum doula can help answer questions about caring for the baby, breastfeeding, etc.. She will also shop for groceries and provide childcare so Mom can rest.

How much does a doula cost? Will my insurance cover it?

In general, a doula's services cost somewhere between \$300-\$600. Although most insurance policies do not presently cover doula care, some do. Ask your doula to help submit a claim and see what happens. When enough consumers ask for the coverage, the health insurance industry may get the hint!

Where can I find a doula?

Try these sources:

[Doulas of North America](#)

[International Childbirth Education Association, Inc.](#)

[Birth Works](#)

[The Association of Labor Assistants and Childbirth Educators](#)

How will I know if a doula is qualified?

Ask about her training and her experience, but keep in mind these two points:

1. The number of births a doula has attended is not necessarily a reflection of her skill level.
2. Neither does it necessarily matter whether she is certified.

Why? You are the best judge of a doula's qualifications. Trust your instincts. Focus on the connection you have with her. Do you sense that you can trust her? Is she compassionate and caring? Does she listen well? Does she seem confident when she answers your questions? Does she address your questions and concerns? In my opinion, the answers to these questions say the most about her qualifications.

How come I've never heard of a doula before?

Our place in the birthing room is still fairly new. But, that's changing quickly. While doulas are still only present at a very small percentage of births, the knowledge of what we offer is growing as more and more families sing our praises! The World Health Organization, the Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada, the Institute for Health Care Improvement (Boston) and the Medical Leadership Council (an organization of 1200 US hospitals) all support the use of doulas.

Where can I learn more?

The internet is always a great place to start - use the sources listed above. And here are some good books on the subject:

Special Women: The Role of the Professional Labor Assistant, by Paulina Perez and Cheryl Snedecker

The Birth Partner: Everything You Need to Know to Help a Woman through Childbirth, by Penny Simkin

Mothering the Mother, by Marshall H. Klaus, Phyllis H. Klaus and John Kennell

Special Delivery, by Rahima Baldwin

Gentle Birth Choice, by Barbara Harper

A Good Birth, A Safe Birth, by Diana Korte and Roberta Scaer

Judi Fitts is a birth doula certified through Doulas of North America (DONA). She practices with Trillium Resources in the Boston area and is the mother of two children.

<http://www.babyzone.com/features/content/display.asp?TopicID=73&ContentID=83&Page=3>

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