Breathing techniques can be done anywhere and can be used during any stressful time in your life to help you relax. During labor and birth, breathing techniques can be used in combination with relaxation, touch, massage, visualization and other methods to help you cope with labor.

Controlled breathing can:
- Relax you and help conserve energy
- Give you and your baby enough oxygen
- Give oxygen to your hard working muscles
- Produce a calming effect
- Help you feel more in control
- Reduce your awareness of pain by helping you focus on other things or places
- Help your body work better, which may shorten your labor

Try each of the techniques on this page and decide which ones feel natural and work best for you. Practice them often so they become second nature. This way you can call on them as an instant response to stress or pain. Make a list of your favorite techniques for your partner to refer to during labor and birth.

General guidelines for any breathing technique

1. Choose and concentrate on a focal point, such as the following:
   - Look at an object or something in the room
   - Listen to music or your partner’s voice
   - Focus on the touch of your partner
   - Make your own vocal sounds such as moaning or saying “I think I can…”
   - Think of every breath as it flows in and out of your body

2. Begin and end each contraction with a cleansing breath (an easy deep breath or sigh in and out). Greet and say goodbye to each contraction in this way. This helps give a boost of oxygen to you and the baby.

3. Breathe in and out through your nose and/or mouth (whatever feels most natural). Breathing should be easy and should help relax you. Your mouth may get dry so have plenty of ice chips and liquids on hand.

4. As you breathe, think “equal in, equal out.” In other words, exhale for the same length of time as you inhale. This can help prevent feeling lightheaded or faint. If you do become lightheaded, cup your hands over your mouth while you breathe during and between contractions, until the sensation goes away.

5. Combine movements such as rocking, massage and stroking your belly in rhythm to your breathing to help promote concentration.

6. Use visualization and imagery. Picture in your mind how your breathing can help your body relax. Some examples:
   - Air flows into your lungs, gathers up your tension and takes it out as you exhale.
   - Each contraction is like a wave that flows in to the shore and then disappears. You never have to see that wave (contraction) again and it brings you closer to having your baby.
   - Imagine a contraction like an opening flower; as it blooms, your cervix is opening to bring you your baby.

Continued
Breathing pattern examples

A word to the support person: To help guide mom in practice, you may want to tell her when the contraction is beginning and ending, as well as when it is one-quarter, half-way and three-quarters through. That way she can pretend to relate her breathing to the intensity of the contraction. These patterns can work at any time in labor, but for practice sessions, have the contractions last for 30 to 90 seconds.

Slow-paced chest or abdominal breathing:
- Take a cleansing breath in and let it out.
- Breathe in and out at a slow, easy rate just like you do when you are very relaxed or about to go to sleep.
- Continue this rate throughout the “practice” contraction.
- When it’s over, take a deep cleansing breath.

Modified-paced/accelerated phase breathing:
- Take a deep cleansing breath in and let it out.
- Begin breathing in and out at a slow easy rate.
- As the contraction becomes stronger, increase the rate of breathing (start to breathe shorter and shallower).
- As the contraction peaks, breathe in and out in short shallow breaths/pants.
- As the contraction starts to go away, slow the rate of breathing. Remember to breathe equal length breaths in and out.
- When it’s over, take a deep cleansing breath.

Patterned/pant-blow/transitional phase breathing:
- Take a gentle deep breath in and let it out.
- In a sequence of three or four breaths and one blow or puff, do one of these two patterns:
  
  HEE–HEE–HEE–HOO,
  HEE–HEE–HEE–HOO

- Repeat the pattern over and over until the contraction goes away.
- When it’s over, take a deep cleansing breath.

Gentle/exhale pushing:
NEVER really bear down and push when practicing. You only imagine the actual bearing down. Just practice the pattern.
- Take two cleansing breaths.
- Take another deep breath in and as you bear down to push, you can exhale in a controlled grunting sound. Focus your pushing efforts to move your baby down and out.
- When you need to, take another deep breath and repeat the pattern (usually several times per contraction).
- When it’s over, take two cleansing breaths. Then rest until the next contraction.

Holding your breath pattern of pushing:
Remember: Do not bear down in practice.
- Take two cleansing breaths.
- Take another deep breath in and as you bear down to push do not exhale; hold your breath to a quick count of 7 to 10.
- Then exhale quickly, take another deep breath and hold it as you bear down to push the baby down the birth canal.
- Repeat this pattern until the contraction is over (usually three times per contraction).
- When it’s over, take two cleansing breaths. Then rest until the next contraction.