PATHWAY TO A HEALTHY BIRTH

In healthy pregnancies, infants, hormonally-driven maternal and fetal/newborn processes are the safest, smoothest route for labor, birth and the crucial days that follow. Clinicians can offer many specific practices to help ensure that women and babies experience these beneficial processes. When women and babies need evidence-based interventions, they are also likely to benefit from practices that support the pathway, whenever possible.

WHAT WILL HELP WOMEN STAY ON THE PATHWAY?

- Minimize stress in prenatal care; encourage women to use stress reduction modalities for stress in pregnancy
- Build women’s confidence, skills, and knowledge for coping with labor
- Encourage women to arrange for a doula in provider labor support

WHAT CAN PULL WOMEN AWAY FROM THE PATHWAY?

- Having high stress levels in pregnancy may ↑ poor birth outcomes4
- Approaching labor with fear and anxiety may ↓ labor progress
- Not having good labor support may ↓ labor progress

EARLY POSTPARTUM AND NEWBORN PERIOD: Beneficial Hormonal Action

Hormones help avoid unneeded interventions and side effects - Oxytocin, beta-endorphins reduce stress and pain during labor - Maternal oxytocin surge facilitates newborn transitions

WHAT WILL HELP WOMEN STAY ON THE PATHWAY?

- Provide comfort measures
- Be patient and use practices that help women have a vaginal birth

WHAT CAN PULL WOMEN AWAY FROM THE PATHWAY?

- Physiologic pulsatile oxytocin release maintains oxytocin receptor sensitivity
- Hormones help avoid unneeded interventions and side effects
- Hormones support labor, continue to prepare for upcoming tasks

ACTIVE LABOR: Beneficial Hormonal Action

Hormones efficiently progress labor, reduce stress, moderate pain, and prepare for maternal-newborn transitions after birth - Hormones help avoid unneeded interventions and side effects

WHAT WILL HELP WOMEN STAY ON THE PATHWAY?

- Encourage women to use comfort measures
- Support mother and baby together until discharge
- Keep mother and baby together and side-to-side after birth

WHAT CAN PULL WOMEN AWAY FROM THE PATHWAY?

- Separating mother and baby may ↑ newborn stress, ↓ breastfeeding, ↓ maternal adaptations, and ↓ attachment10,11
- Delaying breastfeeding may ↓ impact attachment and adjustment processes12

DURING PREGNANCY: Beneficial Hormonal Action

Maternal stress hormones are physiologic and not elevated - Maternal stress response is reduced in pregnancy

WHAT WILL HELP WOMEN STAY ON THE PATHWAY?

- Having high stress levels in pregnancy may ↑ poor birth outcomes4
- Approaching labor with fear and anxiety may ↓ labor progress
- Not having good labor support may ↓ labor progress

WHAT CAN PULL WOMEN AWAY FROM THE PATHWAY?

- Inducing labor* or having a prelabor cesarean may ↓ readiness for labor, birth, and after birth

EARLY LABOR: Beneficial Hormonal Action

Hormones support labor, continue to prepare for upcoming tasks - Oxytocin release in response to labor sensations promotes contractions

WHAT WILL HELP WOMEN STAY ON THE PATHWAY?

- Keep mother and baby calm and safe at home during early labor with phone support
- Provide comfort measures such as tubs, showers, and birth balls
- Be patient with labor progress if mother and baby are healthy

WHAT CAN PULL WOMEN AWAY FROM THE PATHWAY?

- Maternal uterine oxytocin receptor formation may ↓ risk of postpartum hemorrhage9

LATE PREGNANCY: Beneficial Hormonal Action

Hormones prepare for safe and effective labor, maternal-newborn transitions, breastfeeding, maternal adaptations, and maternal infant attachment11

WHAT WILL HELP WOMEN STAY ON THE PATHWAY?

- Encourage breastfeeding to help establish breastfeeding and healthy maternal-infant attachment11
- Fetal catecholamine surge facilitates newborn transitions

WHAT CAN PULL WOMEN AWAY FROM THE PATHWAY?

- Separating mother and baby may ↑ newborn stress, ↓ breastfeeding, ↓ maternal adaptations, and ↓ attachment10,11
- Delaying breastfeeding may ↓ impact attachment and adjustment processes12

LATE PREGNANCY:

WHAT WILL HELP WOMEN STAY ON THE PATHWAY?

- Keep mother and baby together and side-to-side after birth
- Support breastfeeding come after birth and feeding on cue themselves17
- Keep mother and baby together until discharge and encourage this in the days that follow

WHAT CAN PULL WOMEN AWAY FROM THE PATHWAY?

- Missing late-labor fetal catecholamine surge may compromise fetal-newborn transition
- Delaying breastfeeding may compromise breastfeeding, ↓ breastfeeding, ↓ maternal adaptations, and ↓ attachment10,11

Selected References

29. ChildbirthConnection.org/HormonalPhysiology

These recommendations are based on the research summarized in Hormonal Physiology of Childbearing: Evidence and Implications for Women, Babies, and Healthcare Providers by Sarah J. Buckley. This information is not intended to be a substitute for the professional guidance of qualified health care providers.

The Childbirth Connection national partnership for women & families is a program of the national partnership for women & families. Find the full, extensively documented report used to develop these recommendations and related resources for clinicians, childbearing women and others at ChildbirthConnection.org/HormonalPhysiology

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