

Doulas and Health Care Providers: Working Together for Better Maternal and Infant Outcomes

What is a doula?

A doula is a professional who is trained in providing **continuous emotional and physical support to mothers during labor, delivery, and the early postpartum period**. Doula comes from a Greek word that means “a woman who serves” or “handmaiden.”

Doulas as Members of the Maternity Care Team

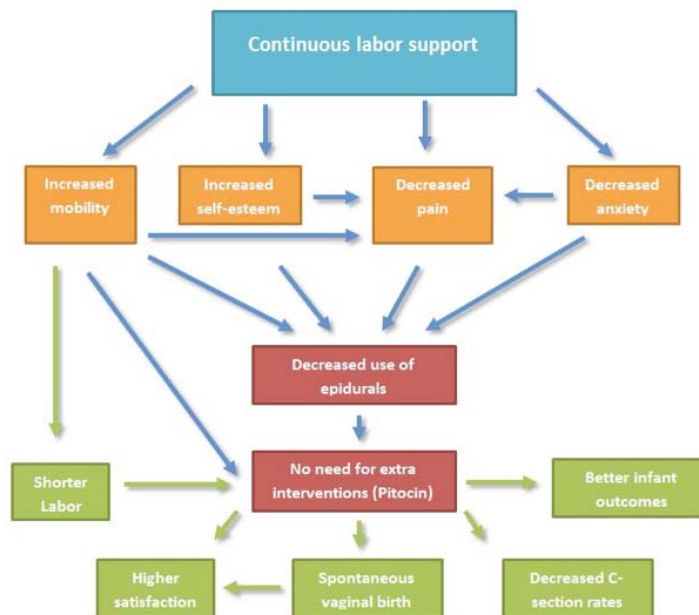
Each person involved in the care of the laboring woman impacts her physical and emotional well-being. Doctors, nurses, and midwives are primarily responsible for the physical health and safety of the mother and baby. However, **non-medical support can reduce the risk of complications during labor and delivery and increase the mother's satisfaction with the overall birth experience**. A doula meets a woman's non-medical needs by providing continuous emotional and physical support, facilitating communication between the laboring woman and her team, and providing helpful information. Many care providers find that having a doula in the room makes for calmer, more satisfied women in birth, and better outcomes overall.

Statistics that Make the Case for Doulas:

According to a Cochrane Review published in 2012 by Hodnett and colleagues, when continuous labor support is provided by a doula, women experience a:

- **31% decrease in the use of Pitocin**
- **28% decrease in the risk of C-section**
- 12% increase in the likelihood of a spontaneous vaginal birth
- 9% decrease in the use of any medications for pain relief
- 14% decrease in the risk of her newborn being admitted to a special care nursery
- 34% decrease in the risk of being dissatisfied with the birth experience

Why do Doulas Improve Outcomes? A Conceptual Model



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Continuous support is incredibly important.

Overall, the evidence shows that it is very important for women to have continuous labor support from someone—whether that be a partner, friend, doula, or other. However, research has shown that **women who receive continuous support from doulas are more likely to have better outcomes than women who receive other types of continuous support**, including hospital staff, nurses, midwives, partners, childbirth educators, retired nurses, and friends/relatives of the mother.

What do doulas do?

Doulas “mother the mother.” While performing her role, a doula:

- Provides emotional support
- Encourages the use of comfort measures: breathing, relaxation, movement, positioning
- Offers information and explanation of events during labor
- Continuously reassures and comforts the mother
- Encourages a mother to become informed about various birth choices
- Encourages the mother to communicate her needs and desires to the care provider (does not communicate for her)
- Assists partner in supporting the laboring mother

What doulas do NOT do:

Doulas:

- Are NOT medical professionals
- Do not perform clinical tasks such as vaginal exams or fetal heart monitoring
- Do not give medical advice or diagnose conditions
- Do not take over the role of husband or partner
- Do not deliver the baby
- Do not change shifts

You can read more about what doulas do and do not do in the [DONA International’s standard of practice for birth doulas](#).

A Commitment to Mother-Friendly Care:

Offering unrestricted access to doulas and continuous labor support of the mother’s choice is the first step to achieving designation as a Mother-Friendly Hospital (CIMS, 1996). To learn more about the 10 Steps to Mother-Friendly care, visit: www.motherfriendly.org

References and Further Reading:

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