



embrace

The Movement for Mothers

Birth Resource

Preparing for an empowered birth

Dear Expecting Parents.

As you prepare for your labour and the birth of your child, we have prepared this resource to help you navigate your birthing environment. We have developed this tool as a necessity. We wish for a world where mothers are able to respectfully articulate what they need and this is always listened to and supported. Unfortunately, for too many in South Africa, this is not the case and many birthing experiences are exactly the opposite. The system in South Africa is one that is under-resourced and causes healthcare workers to burn out. In response to the countless stories of abuse and neglect, we've put together this guide to help you have a more empowered and positive birth experience.

- How to prepare in the lead up to your stay
- What to pack
- During your stay
- What to do if you experience mistreatment





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How to prepare in the lead up to your stay

Obstetric units are incredibly busy - prepare yourself that you may spend much of your labour alone in a very busy ward. This is especially the case with current COVID-19 restrictions.

It is ok to feel anxious and alone - acknowledge these feelings and talk with someone beforehand about how you will deal with them whilst you're in hospital.

Tips/Ideas:

- Labour at home for as long as you can whilst monitoring your contractions. Unless you are over 40 weeks or have pre-existing conditions, you could head to the hospital once contractions are 4 minutes apart, one minute in length and this has lasted for an hour.
- Make sure you learn about the stages of labour and what you can expect when labouring. You could sign up for [MomConnect](#) as this WhatsApp line provides basic antenatal education. We also recommend you join a local [Flourish](#) antenatal group for on-going community and support.

Remember - the national guideline is that one person can accompany a birthing person for support. During COVID-19, however, this policy has been amended and you may not be allowed to have your partner present.





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What to pack

- Masks
- Phone charger and adapter/plug
- Prepaid airtime
- A loving focus - this might be a photograph from home or a spiritual verse written on a piece of paper or a phrase of affirmation, for example: "I am strong, I am not alone, my baby and I are a powerful team". You can place your focus point on or next to your bed to look at as you breathe through your contractions.
- Big water bottle filled with water - so important that mom is hydrated
- Snacks that give you energy
- Cash in case there is a small shop at the facility
- Clean underwear
- Toothbrush and toothpaste
- Soap
- Hand sanitizer
- Baby wipes or toilet paper (not for the baby but for you to keep clean or to clean up your surroundings)
- Maternity pads
- Bean bag - if there is a microwave warm it up and place it on your back
- Padding you can use for bleeding if the facility is short of resources - linen savers, old towels or sheets that you can fold over
- A small blanket - hospitals are not always equipped with enough linen or bedding and you may get cold, especially after a birth.
- Clothing and care items for your baby

TIP: Pack everything into a bag that is easy to carry through the different wards (eg: a backpack). Pack your documents in 1 section of your bag so you can quickly and easily find something if the nursing staff ask for it.





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During your stay

- Bring along an extra sealed treat/snack for the nursing staff to have in their tea break - share it with a kind word thanking them for their service upon arrival. This also acknowledges that you know they need a break and you respect that.
- Stay mobile - walk up and down the corridors, bounce on pilates balls if they have them, sway your hips from side to side. Even if you are a high-risk mom, and you have the CTG on monitoring the baby's heartbeat and your contractions, the standard frequency for a vaginal exam is every 4 hours. The risk of being examined more often could lead to infection.
- Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth - this can be useful during contractions and also in stressful moments on the ward
- Embrace the contractions - they are bringing you closer to meeting your baby.
- It is a mental fight - recite phrases and strong "I can" statements
- Sip water often
- Keep your mask on at all times.
- Practice good hygiene - use the showers, try not to litter, spill things or walk around with wet feet.
- **Remember:** nurses, sisters and doctors work long 12-hour shifts, are on their feet and often don't get to have a break.
- Address staff by their title.
- Respect their guidance - if they say no walking up and down, opt for other methods of keeping active in labour - eg: stand and use your bed to support your hands/palms, stand with legs open, sway from side to side, straddle a chair.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions about what to expect, signs of problems, potential examinations. Do so in a curious manner rather than in an accusing tone.

Eg: if they give you a pill: rather than asking "what is this for?" you could say, "Thank you is this a painkiller?" (even if it looks nothing like it) you will most likely get a better response e.g. "No, but it will help you progress faster...." This works to your advantage both in terms of being informed as well as in the case of a shift ending and new staff arriving. If they missed putting it in your file you are able to say "I got a multi-colour pill that the sister said would help with...."

- State that you want 'informed consent' before any procedures, medication or examinations. You have the right to understand what is happening to you at all times.
- Try your best to ignore any verbal assaults and threats and continue to thank staff for help. You could also reply to verbal assaults with, "Please do not talk to me this way."
- Don't argue but state clearly, even repeatedly, why you need what you need.

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What to do if you experience mistreatment

Remember: everyone has bad days and an obstetric unit can be a very stressful environment for the staff too. It will help to acknowledge the staff as human beings and to focus on working together with the staff to find positive solutions to what you're experiencing.

Tips:

- If you feel you are being mistreated you can request to see the unit manager. Do so respectfully, perhaps using a sentence such as "I feel that we are experiencing some miscommunications about my care and I'd like to talk to the Sister in charge about this". If you feel that your complaints are not being taken seriously, please don't remain silent. Continue to ask for help until you are heard and acknowledged.
- Monday to Friday from 7:30am-5pm patients can call 0809116472. This is the Health Ombudsman complaints free telephone line. In the case of neglect and denial of care this office can intervene immediately during these times. In most cases they will encourage patients to first make a complaint at the facility, however, they can be told to take the complaint and do the provincial and hospital level follow-up on the patient's behalf and inform them on progress. If you do make contact during your stay, do so respectfully and quietly as the staff may hear you whilst you're on the phone. You don't want them to treat you differently because you've made contact with the complaints line.

We acknowledge that as a pregnant person you might be feeling anxious about the environment you're needing to give birth in. Our hope for you is that this guide will help you to gain some control through physical and mental preparation. Every mother deserves the very best care. We encourage you to process your birth story and to talk about it with people you can trust.

**We must stand together to demand better, for mothers and for our children.
We will not give up.**



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