

# Support for Women During Childbirth: Midwives, Doulas, and Others

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For many years, one of the important components of midwifery care has been to provide a continuous, supportive presence to women in labor. Indeed, the word midwife means “with women,” and one of the hallmarks characterizing the art and science of midwifery is the “therapeutic value of human presence.”

Unfortunately, in busy labor and delivery wards in today’s hospitals, women are too often left to labor without such continuous support. In recent years, a number of randomized trials have compared such “usual care” with continuous support provided by caregivers, including nurses, midwives or lay people, and have concluded that the continuous presence of a support person reduces the length of labor, likelihood of medication for pain relief, operative vaginal delivery (forceps or vacuum extraction), cesarean delivery and low Apgar scores. In addition, mothers who receive continuous support during labor are more satisfied with the birth experience.

Knowing that it is a hallmark of midwifery care, women seeking continuous support during labor often seek out midwives. The American College of Nurse-Midwives also receives inquiries regarding doulas. *What is a doula? How do I locate a doula? What is the difference between a midwife and a doula?* This document was developed to highlight the importance of caregiver support for women during childbirth and to answer common questions about doulas and other professional labor assistants.

## **The Evidence for Caregiver Support for Women During Childbirth**

Fourteen trials, involving more than 5000 women were recently reviewed by the highly respected Cochrane Pregnancy and Childbirth Group, concluding that “continuous support during labour from caregivers (nurses, midwives or lay people) appears to have a number of benefits for mothers and their babies, and there do not appear to be any harmful effects.”

## **Support During Childbirth: What to Expect from Your Caregiver**

Families shopping for maternity care should ask potential caregivers what they can expect. *Will the caregiver be there continuously, periodically, or just prior to the birth?* Most midwifery practices are structured in a way that maximizes the midwives’ ability to be with women continuously during labor. In some busy practices, or at particularly busy times, a midwife might be called upon to care for more than one woman in labor, to make hospital rounds, or return calls. While some would feel both a midwife and a doula are unnecessary, the presence of a professional labor assistant can assure a woman that she is not left alone during labor and the two roles are viewed as complementary.

## **Doulas and Other Professional Labor Assistants**

A professional labor assistant might be a doula or a monitrice. The word “doula” comes from ancient Greek and is used today to refer to a “woman experienced in childbirth who provides continuous physical, emotional, and informational support to the mother before, during and just

after childbirth.” “Monitrice” comes from the French “to watch over attentively and to guide” and refers to an assistant who provides continuous emotional and physical support during labor and birth and also has clinical skills to assess fetal and maternal well being. Certified doulas attend a three-day course and meet other certification requirements. They have many tools for providing physical comfort, but do not provide clinical care.

**The following organizations can provide more information about professional labor support:**

- **Association of Labor Assistants & Childbirth Educators (ALACE)** is a non-profit educational organization for labor assistants and childbirth educators. They may be contacted at P.O. Box 390436, Cambridge, MA 02139; (617) 441-2500; [www.alace.org](http://www.alace.org).
- **Doulas of North America (DONA)** is an international non-profit organization of doulas who are trained to provide the highest quality labor support to birthing women and their families. DONA certifies doulas using an international standard. They may be contacted at P.O. Box 626, Jasper, IN 47547; (888) 788-3662; [www.dona.org](http://www.dona.org).
- **International Childbirth Education Association Inc. (ICEA)** is an organization of over 7,000 members from 42 countries that unites those who believe in freedom of choice based on knowledge of alternatives in family-centered maternity and newborn care. ICEA offers doula certification programs. They may be contacted at P.O. Box 20048, Minneapolis, MN 55420; (952) 854-8660; [www.icea.org](http://www.icea.org).

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The ACNM “QuickInfo” series was developed by the Department of Professional Services to respond to common inquiries, summarizing ACNM resources regarding a particular topic, as well as listing selected literature and a variety of other resources. Your feedback is welcomed; contact Professional Services at (240) 485-1800 or [info@acnm.org](mailto:info@acnm.org).