

How birth companions can support providers during labour and delivery



What are companions and why are they important?

Every woman has the right to be accompanied by a birth companion. This companion can be any person chosen by the woman:

- Stay with her during labour and childbirth;
- Accompany her to the hospital, **even during the COVID-19 pandemic**, and;
- Support the woman after the baby is born until discharge.

Women value and benefit from the presence of someone they trust. With a trusted companion present, women are more likely to:

- Feel **safe, strong, confident, and secure**.
- Feel like they can **ask questions of the providers**.
- Feel support from providers about their anxieties and fears.
- Have **better maternal and perinatal outcomes**.

Having an individual of her choice is of greater benefit than having staff from the facility as her companion.

- Midwives and other health providers can explain things to the woman and companion;
- Companions may also **assist the midwife** in small tasks she may ask her to do;
- **Companions can speak up in support of women** to ensure they receive assistance on time; and
- Trusted companions can provide **practical and emotional support** throughout labour and delivery.

What can a companion do?

Provide support to the woman during labour. The companion can:

- ✓ Encourage her and rub the woman's back, legs, and arms as needed, to help relieve pain
- ✓ Wipe her brow, neck, or chest with a wet cloth or fan her to keep her cool
- ✓ Hold her hand between contractions, if she wants
- ✓ Assist her to walk around and find a position that is comfortable to her
- ✓ Assist her to the toilet and help her take a bath/shower in early labour if she chooses
- ✓ Talk to her—give emotional support and provide information on what is happening
- ✓ Remind her that it is okay to shout, yell, or cry out during the delivery
- ✓ Help the woman to relax between contractions and use deep breathing exercises



Companions can support the labour process by assisting the midwife with whatever she/he asks, and by reminding and encouraging the woman to:

- ✓ Urinate every 2 hours
- ✓ Drink fluids every hour or more and eat lightly as she wishes
- ✓ Use breathing methods that can help her relax
- ✓ Use comfortable positions for labour (walking, sitting, side-lying)
- ✓ Push only when guided by the midwife



Companions can support communication between the midwife and the woman by:

- ✓ Listening to the midwife's instructions and helping communicate them to the woman
- ✓ Helping the woman ask questions and making sure she gets the information she needs
- ✓ Make sure the midwife hears and responds to the woman's requests [e.g., painkillers]
- ✓ Making sure referral plans are pre-established and adhered to as necessary.
- ✓ Updating the family on how the woman is doing



After delivery, birth companions can help:

- ✓ Observe woman and baby closely, check for danger signs such as abnormal bleeding, report such bleeding to midwife
- ✓ Ensure the woman is properly counseled on self care and baby care by the midwife
- ✓ After normal delivery, encourage the woman to drink fluids regularly
- ✓ Make sure the woman is not separated from the baby (unless medically indicated)
- ✓ Ensure skin-to-skin contact is maintained
- ✓ Support early initiation of breastfeeding
- ✓ Report bleeding from cord and difficulties in baby's breathing
- ✓ Help the midwife dress, take care of, and check the baby and help the new mother change the nappy/diaper



What should you as a provider ask or remind a companion?

As a provider, you can ensure that birth companions **know to call for help if:**

- ✓ A routine assessment is due but the midwife is not around
- ✓ The woman's amniotic membrane ruptures
- ✓ The woman is bearing down with contractions
- ✓ Contractions have been regular but suddenly stop
- ✓ She is suddenly in much more pain
- ✓ She loses consciousness or has fits
- ✓ If she feels drowsy or collapses
- ✓ There is heavy vaginal bleeding
- ✓ She is breathing fast and feels "clammy" or she feels her heart is racing
- ✓ The baby is not suckling
- ✓ If there is any other concern



Remind the birth companion that they **SHOULD:**

- ✓ Wash their hands with soap before entering or leaving the labour ward
- ✓ Wear a mask during labour and delivery (following COVID-19 guidelines)
- ✓ Wash their hands before and after touching the baby
- ✓ Ensure cleanliness of the woman's space in the labour ward and postnatal room
- ✓ Follow other infection prevention guidelines (including COVID-19 guidelines)



Remind the companion that they **should NOT:**

- ⊗ Slap or yell at the woman
- ⊗ Encourage the woman to push unless asked by midwife
- ⊗ Give advice other than that given by the midwife
- ⊗ Keep the woman in bed if she wants to move around
- ⊗ Provide any local medicine/ herbs or conduct any physical examinations
- ⊗ Disclose any confidential information
- ⊗ Bring any other companions or family members into the labour ward



Briefing the companion: What to expect during childbirth

As some companions may have never experienced a birth before, please take a few minutes to brief the companion **on what to expect during labour and delivery** and **how they can best support you**, healthcare provider

Upon arrival, **orient the companion to labour & delivery unit**, particularly if you are working alone. Show her/him where essential supplies are stored, and **make a plan for how the companion can help in an emergency**.

- Where another nurse, doctor or midwife can be found to help.
- Bandages, gauze pads and sterile water.
- If a NASG is available, where it is stored and how to assist with putting it on.
- Where shower or bathing facilities are located, and where urine can be disposed.
- The companion's presence and support does NOT replace midwife; they should always follow what the midwife tells them.

Labour and childbirth differ from pregnancy to pregnancy, but there are always four basic stages: early and active labour, birth, delivery of the placenta, and recovery. Please **describe the key events that happen during each stage so the companion and woman knows what to expect.**

There are many common procedures that happen during birth, but with which the companion may not be familiar. Briefly **explain the following procedures and their timing:**

- Palpating the abdomen to check contractions, ½ hourly.
- Checking the foetal heart rate, ½ hourly.
- Vaginal or pelvic examinations are conducted once every four hours.
- Ultrasound monitoring (if available).

- Giving an injection or starts an IV line.

Emergency situations sometimes occur. In these situations it will be very important to act quickly:

- **There may not be time for thorough explanations.**
- Trust the midwife and do whatever they ask.
- It may be most helpful to stand at the head of the woman to comfort her and support slow deep breathing.

If the companion cannot manage a difficult situation, they can leave at any time, but should inform the midwife or nurse on duty.

If a companion is disruptive or creates a dangerous situation, they will be asked to leave.

What you as a provider can ask the companion to do to support you:



Emotional support and comfort to woman: Ask the companion to comfort the woman, encourage her and massage her back to ease the pain. Assist the woman with elimination when needed.



Food and water: Ask the companion to prepare food and water and keep it close by. Encourage the woman to eat and drink as desired.



Extra pair of hands: Remind the companion to not go far from the delivery room and ask them to do simple tasks as needed.



Torch bearer: If needed, you can ask the companion to switch on a light or hold a torch when you check on the woman during and after delivery.



Bleeding monitor: After delivery, tell the companion to regularly ask the mother and check the bed for bleeding, and report to the midwife if there is blood.



Baby care: You can ask the companion to help dress, take care of, and check the baby. Check the baby for danger signs

This work is part of the Advancing Postpartum Hemorrhage Care (APPHC) partnership supported by USAID and led by the Breakthrough RESEARCH Project and the Health Evaluation and Applied Research Development (HEARD) Project. All research activities in Malawi are developed and implemented in coordination with the Malawi Ministry of Health and Population and the ONSE Health project. The APPHC partnership generates and tests solutions to address key implementation barriers for PPH prevention and treatment and contributes to the effective implementation of interventions, strategies, and innovations for PPH in Madagascar and Malawi. <https://www.respectfulcareresources.com/apphc>



This document is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under cooperative agreements Breakthrough RESEARCH (AID-OAA-A-17-00018) and USAID's Health Evaluation and Applied Research Development Project (HEARD) (AID-OAA-A-17-00002). The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of Breakthrough RESEARCH, Population Council, and University Research Co., LLC and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

USAID's Health Evaluation and Applied Research Development (HEARD) project leverages a global partnership of more than 30 institutions to generate, synthesize, and use evidence to improve the implementation of policies and programs related to USAID priority areas, and crucial for improving health and development in low and middle-income countries.

Breakthrough RESEARCH catalyzes SBC by conducting state-of-the-art research and evaluation and promoting evidence-based solutions to improve health and development programs around the world. Breakthrough RESEARCH is a consortium led by the Population Council in partnership with Avenir Health, ideas42, Institute for Reproductive Health at Georgetown University, Population Reference Bureau, and Tulane University.