

# The Centre For Women's Reproductive Care

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## How to Avoid an Unnecessary Caesarean Birth

Clearly there are times when a Caesarean birth is very necessary. However, some doctors and many others are concerned that some Caesareans are medically unnecessary. With appropriate preparation and care during pregnancy, labour and delivery many Caesareans could be avoided. Caesarean birth does involve increased risks to mothers and sometimes also for babies. If those risks can be avoided then both mothers and babies will benefit.

The following suggestions are things you can do to help avoid an unnecessary Caesarean. By preparing thoroughly, you can help to ensure that your birth experience is both healthy and positive.

### Before Labour

- Read and prepare yourself for the birth experience. Take whatever opportunities you can to attend any classes or discussion groups both inside and outside of the hospital environment. It is very helpful to understand something about the various stages of labour, the many normal variations that can occur and the uncertainties that often arise.
- Prepare yourself physically and mentally by practising relaxation and physical exercise. It is not possible to exercise the most important muscle of all ie the uterus but physical fitness and mental preparation will improve your capacity to cope with the pain and discomforts of labour.
- Eat a well-balanced diet. Smoking cessation and the use of foods rich in protein, vitamins and minerals can prevent complications in pregnancy, labour and delivery. Salt restriction is not recommended during pregnancy. Salt food to taste.
- Research and prepare a birth plan. Show copies of your birth plan to your labour support person(s), doctor, midwives and hospital and ask for their comments. Be prepared to discuss and negotiate alternatives. Beware of inflexible attitudes, timetables and conditions in both your plans and those of your care providers.
- It may be important to discuss some issues with more than one obstetric care provider. If a Caesarean birth is recommended and you think that there may be an alternative, then ask the obstetrician or your general practitioner about a second opinion. You are entitled to a complete explanation of the reasons for a Caesarean provided in a manner that makes you comfortable (whatever the final decision and outcome).
- Find a labour support person. A number of studies have shown that the presence of a female labour support person can significantly reduce the need for a Caesarean. If necessary, explore the possibilities with more than one person, and look for someone with whom you feel comfortable. By preference that person will have attended several births, be familiar with some of the many variations and options that arise and have a positive attitude to a normal birth.
- If your baby is breech then ask about "tilt-position" exercises, external version (turning the baby) and vaginal breech delivery. This is another situation in which you may wish to seek a second opinion.
- If you have had a prior Caesarean then seriously consider and explore the option of a vaginal birth. Many doctors believe that 60-80% of women with a prior Caesarean section can go on to deliver their subsequent babies vaginally.

## **During Labour**

- Induction of labour is more likely to result in a Caesarean birth. If an induction of labour is recommended and you think that there may be an alternative, then ask the obstetrician or your general practitioner about a second opinion. You are entitled to a complete explanation of the reasons for an induction of labour provided in a manner that makes you feel comfortable.
- Stay at home for as long as possible. If you have any doubts about this then phone the hospital and discuss your particular circumstances with a midwife.
- Walk and change positions frequently. Studies have shown that remaining upright for as long as possible can help. Labour in the position that is most comfortable for you. In general it is not advisable to labour or birth flat on your back as the weight of your baby on the vena cava (a major blood vessel in the mother's abdomen) can decrease the blood supply and oxygen to your baby.
- Continue to eat and drink small amounts of appropriate foods especially during early labour. Your midwife will be able to advise you about this. In more advanced stages of labour small drinks of water may be all that is required.
- If your labour is progressing slowly then you should discuss options for its management with your midwife and doctor. Remember that one option may be to simply expect a longer time before your baby is born.
- If your waters break, then it is better to avoid a vaginal examination (to avoid the risk of infection), unless medically indicated for a specific reason. Discuss with your doctor and midwife the options that are available when the waters have broken and labour has not commenced.
- Many studies have shown that the routine use of continuous fetal monitoring contributes to an increase in Caesareans. Discuss with your doctor and midwife the options of intermittent monitoring. If continuous electronic monitoring is required then one inevitable outcome that we all have to accept is that this will alarm us more often than is really necessary.
- Well-performed studies have shown that the inappropriate use of epidural anaesthesia can slow down labour and increase the likelihood of an instrumental or Caesarean birth. Be aware of your options for pain relief during labour and be guided by the advice of your midwife and doctor. If you do have an epidural then be prepared to let it wear off (the pains will come back) but you can do something very positive by pushing for the birth of your baby.
- Find out the risks and benefits of routine and emergency procedures before you are faced with them. When faced with any procedure, find out why it has been recommended for your circumstances, what are the possible effects or outcomes, and what are your other options. Remember, nothing is absolute. If you have concerns or questions, then be prepared to assert yourself (or have your support person do so on your behalf). Be prepared to accept responsibility for your requests and the decisions that arise.

From the Internet Publication by the International Caesarean Awareness Network