

# THE NATURAL WAY

Pregnancy and birth are beautiful phases in a woman's life, and should not be riddled with fear, trauma and stress, feel believers in natural birth. Experts and moms who have experienced birthing this way, give us the lowdown.

BY PRITI SALIAN  
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**N**atural birthing is the new urban phenomenon in India today. Practitioners believe that birthing is not the complex medical procedure it is made out to be. "People are becoming exceedingly dependent on medicine, allowing doctors full control of the birthing process instead of the mother," says Dr. Ameet Dhurandhar, a Mumbai-based gynaecologist, obstetrician and HypnoBirthing practitioner. Experts like him feel that giving birth is as natural as any other physiological process in a woman's body. The key is for the woman to be in control. Natural childbirth is the philosophy that endorses this. "For moms who opt for natural birth, there will be less fear, less pain, less chance of complications and an enthralling birthing experience," says Divya Deswal, a doula and a HypnoBirthing practitioner certified from the HypnoBirthing Institute, US.

## REAL LIFE



"I had a magical birthing experience. I had my child the natural way, sans drugs, repeating HypnoBirthing affirmations in a water bath, as I listened to music of my choice. I have been a firm believer in all things natural, and never really had medicines as a child. When I fell ill, my parents stuck to naturopathy. So I simply couldn't allow so many medicines into my system while giving birth to my child. Natural birth for my baby was the most obvious choice for me. I am now ready to give birth to my second child, the same way."

—Saloni Zutshi, mom to 2-year-old Anaadyanta, born at Phoenix Hospital, Delhi



# 11 NATURAL BIRTH FACTS TO KNOW

The thrust is to make the mom comfortable. “Natural childbirth is a philosophy whereby a healthy mother can give birth to her child on her own terms, without unnecessary external medical intervention,” says Dr. Dhurandhar. In practical terms, this means that...

- A healthy mother who has a normal pregnancy can, in consultation with a doctor who supports natural birth, decline to have ultrasounds during the course of the pregnancy.
- An expectant mom can choose to deliver her baby without any drugs to hasten the birth (usually given intravenously).
- She can decide not to take injections for reducing pain (like an epidural).
- She can decline the enema.
- She can also say no to the episiotomy (a surgical incision to enlarge the vaginal opening to help deliver the baby).
- She can use as many non-invasive pain-relief methods, such as a birthing ball, hydro-therapy or simply a walk around, to relieve pain if she chooses.
- She can deliver in a position that she likes—sitting, standing, lying down, squatting, kneeling or the hands-and-knees position (crawling).
- She can specify the people she wants around her. Yes, even if it means gathering family and friends around to view the birth and support her emotionally and physically (by holding her hand or massaging her feet).
- She can choose the environment—home, a hospital that supports natural birth, or a birthing centre.
- Depending on where the birth takes place, she can have either a trained midwife and doula (at home or at a birthing centre), or a doctor who believes in the philosophy (in a hospital) to assist her throughout labour and birth, as well as in the weeks following the delivery.
- She can breastfeed as soon as her baby is born, to help in the bonding experience. This is said to help reduce post-partum depression and help the baby adjust to his new environment as well.

## REAL LIFE



“Complete peace of mind is what you can expect in a birthing centre that supports natural birth. When I went to my birthing centre, my contractions were coming in close together, but I was in labour for another 17 hours before my baby arrived. Just minutes before my baby was to come, I was so exhausted that I was ready to give up, but

Dr. Vijaya Krishnan (see 7 Things to Know About a Birthing Centre), who had not left me even for a minute during those 17 hours, made me feel my baby’s head and I got the energy to go on.”

—Subbulakshmi, mom to 2-month-old Lassya, born at The Sanctum, Hyderabad

## QUICK QUESTIONS

Questions you may have on the process and its advantages, answered.

**Q. Can anyone opt for a natural birthing process?**

A. Yes, provided they have a low-risk pregnancy. Your gynaecologist should have ruled out chances of complications. “All healthy women with a healthy pregnancy can opt for a natural birth,” says Dr. Urvashi Sehgal, Delhi-based consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist, whose hospital, Phoenix, supports natural birth. If you have a high-risk pregnancy and problems such as gestational diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, or any other medical condition, you will need to go to a hospital. Your ob-gyn will monitor the birth throughout and use her skill, along with necessary medical interventions, to help you give birth to a healthy baby.

**Q. In what way does natural birth benefit the mom?**

A. Those who believe in natural birth are of the view that when the mother is comfortable, she is more likely to be stress-free. A mother’s mental tension can trigger a response from the sympathetic nervous system, which in turn will divert the blood flow from her uterus and the baby to the muscles of her arms and legs. This could lead to a tightening of the muscles in the pelvic region and may lead to a situation in which medical intervention becomes necessary. “Since the mom is not on medication, she is fully awake and active during labour. Her awareness helps her find the most comfortable positions, which aids in the delivery process,” says Dr. Dhurandhar.

**Q. In what way does natural birth benefit the baby?**

A. Practitioners of natural birth believe that medical interventions during labour, such as giving Pitocin for induction of labour, may actually cause the baby harm. When pains are induced with Pitocin, the contractions may be longer, stronger and more frequent (faster than nature intended). With little time between contractions, the baby gets squeezed and her heart rate gets little time to recover. This may lead to foetal distress (baby is under stress and anything may go wrong). Since the baby’s exposure to narcotics (any anaesthetic, like an epidural) and other drugs used in labour is nil, she is more alert and latches onto the breast faster, establishing quick breastfeeding.

**Q. What if there is a medical emergency?**

A. Mothers who opt for natural birth go on to have a normal delivery most of the time. A medical emergency is quite rare if the mother’s pregnancy has progressed normally and smoothly. If however, there is an emergency, the mother will, most likely, already be in a hospital. If she is at a birthing centre, the centre will have an arrangement with a hospital nearby to take care of any emergencies. If she is at home, the midwife will be trained to foresee any emergency that may arise. She will then advise the family to shift the mother to a hospital. “Even though the birth itself cannot be controlled, the birthing experience is well within our reach,” says Deswal.

“If your husband and immediate relatives do not believe in home birth, you should not consider it,” says Delhi-based Rita Theobald, mom to 9-year-old Krish, who was born at home.

## 7 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT A BIRTHING CENTRE

The birthing centre is said to make labour more bearable in order to facilitate natural birth.

● **THE AIM:** “To give the mom privacy, peace and comfort, recognizing that she is the central figure in her birth process. At the same time, mother and baby are monitored to ensure that they are healthy at all times. This model of giving emotional and physical support on a continuous basis, however long labour takes, without unnecessary medical interventions, gives the mother

confidence, helps labour become more bearable and facilitates natural birth,” says Dr. Vijaya Krishnan, a physiotherapist, a Lamaze-certified childbirth educator, and a midwife-in-training from the National College of Midwifery, New Mexico, US.

● **THE PROCEDURE:** The mother will be asked to admit herself into a birthing centre as and when she wishes to or feels the need to.

● **THE SPACE:** Once she is admitted into the birthing centre, she will be given a room to stay in. These single occupancy rooms are much larger than the average hospital room. However, she will not be restricted to this room alone. She has the freedom to walk around the facility. She can also have the people that she chooses around her. The room she is given is also the birthing room. There is no separate labour room.

● **THE EQUIPMENT:** “Squatting bars, birthing balls, birthing stools and a hydrotherapy tub will also be available to enhance comfort and provide the mother with a variety of positions to labour in and help with good descent of the baby,” says Dr. Krishnan.

● **THE STAFF:** Professional midwives and doulas help with pain and discomfort. They will support the mother through the antenatal period, labour, birth and post-partum period.

● **THE BACK-UP:** Birthing centres will also have good accessibility to emergency medical services, in case the need arises to shift the mother there. If a birthing centre is located within a hospital, a doctor will remain in discreet vigilance all through the birthing process. This ensures that in case of an emergency, help is at hand.

● **THE COST:** Rs 35,000 to 50,000, all inclusive (for the facility and the staff).



# 3 WAYS OF NATURAL BIRTHING

A mom may opt for one or a combination of these methods.

**WATER BIRTHING** Those who are comfortable in water and believe that it actually can reduce pain opt for this method.

**How it works:** Practitioners of hydrotherapy believe that water helps provide relief from pain during labour. When a mom sits in warm water, her body temperature increases and causes blood vessels to dilate. This increases blood circulation and lowers blood pressure. It also eases muscular tension and enhances relaxation between contractions. A relaxed body allows the uterus to contract efficiently and a relaxed mind stimulates the release of endorphins, the body's natural pain killers, diminishing the stress hormones. The buoyancy of water reduces body weight considerably, relieving pressure on joints and muscles. "Warm water relaxes the muscles of the pelvic floor and the perineal muscles (between the vagina and the rectum). So we see less natural tears," says Dr. Krishnan. "Water provides a gentler transition to life outside the womb for the baby," adds Deswal.

**The experience:** The mother will be given a hydrotherapy tub to sit or lie in during labour, but what works for one mother does not necessarily work for another. In case the mom is not comfortable, the doctor or midwife may use water to give her a shower or bath to ease labour pains.

**The cons:** If your water bag bursts and the contractions haven't begun, a hydrotherapy tub cannot be used. Also, it is essential to monitor the heart rate of the foetus while the mom is in water. If the heart rate of the foetus goes up due to the warmth of the water, the mom must take a break from the tub for a while before she can get in again.

**HOME BIRTHING** A mom who feels strongly about being in her own environment, surrounded by her family can opt for this method.

**How it works:** The mom will first have to read up and discuss the birthing process with her gynaecologist. She will need to find one who supports it. She will also have to find a trained midwife and a doula (optional). She will need to have a back-up hospital plan in case of an emergency. The ob-gyn should know the pregnancy history. The hospital should not be more than a 30-minute drive from her home, even in peak traffic. The hospital must also be informed in advance and ready to receive her, just in case. All through the pregnancy she can choose to get herself checked by the trained midwife, along with the gynaecologist, just to keep her in the know. A discussion with the midwife will help her decide whether to use a water-birthing tub, a birthing stool (helps in using the upright position for birth—a better position, according to believers in natural birth, since gravity assists in the baby's descent), or a ball (helps in taking pressure off the mom's back while birthing, thus reducing pain experienced) to assist with the home birth.

**The experience:** When the mom goes into labour, the midwife will be there. She will come equipped with a Doppler for listening to the baby, stethoscope, blood pressure cuff, IV bag, oxygen and catheters, to be used if the need arises. It is, however, advisable to check the record of the midwife before employment.

**The cons:** High-risk pregnancies are not possible at home.

**HYPNOBIRTHING** Believers in hypno-therapy (the use of hypnosis for healing or therapeutic purposes) opt for this method.

**How it works:** HypnoBirthing, the Mongan Method, is a method of preparing for childbirth rather than a birthing method. Expectant moms with complications who are sure to have C-sections can also take HypnoBirthing classes to help them during childbirth. The method teaches moms that in the absence of fear and tension, or special medical circumstances, severe pain does not have to accompany labour.

**The experience:** Moms will need to attend five sessions of 2½ hours each, with their spouses. Talks detail the birthing process. Moms and dads are told the importance of the birthing experience for the baby. They are taught breathing exercises for relaxation, shown films about positive birth experiences of other moms and given hypnosis scripts to help them let go of fears about birth. Classes are available as early in the pregnancy as the mom wishes. The latest that classes can be started is by the sixth month, so that both parents get enough time to practise before birth. "Each mom uses the HypnoBirthing techniques in her own way," says Deswal. So it is entirely up to you how much use you can make of it. "Some moms have also used the techniques to calm their babies!" adds Deswal. Says Zutshi, who gave birth to her son in a hydrotherapy tub and also used HypnoBirthing techniques, "I didn't go into labour thinking about pain. I was in such a deep state of relaxation that I didn't feel any pain."

**The cons:** HypnoBirthing is not like popping a pill to kill pain. It's the mother's belief and state of mind.

## 2 TERMS TO KNOW

These are two professionals who help in the process of natural childbirth.

**A DOULA** is a lady trained and experienced in childbirth. She provides non-medical support, both physical and emotional, during labour and birth. In India, they undergo a two-year training programme with CAPP—Childbirth and Post-Partum Professionals Association, headquartered in Mumbai. Contact [www.cappaindia.com](http://www.cappaindia.com) or [birthindia.org](http://birthindia.org) to find a doula. Rs 7,000 to 15,000

**A MIDWIFE** is not a dai, who works purely on experience and is often unlettered. A midwife does all that the doula does. In addition, she is medically trained. She monitors the baby's heartbeat through labour and can foresee an emergency. She will also see that the mom-baby connect is immediate, with breastfeeding. She continues to visit the new parents for four to six weeks after the birth. "A midwife will help you feel your own power during birth," says Red Miller, a midwife from Canada. Midwives trained in India cannot practise independently. They can only practise under doctors. Midwives trained from the US, Canada, UK and Europe, however, are licensed to practise in homes. Find a midwife at [www.justlink.in](http://www.justlink.in) or [www.birthindia.org](http://www.birthindia.org). Rs 40,000 upwards

## 5 FACILITIES THAT SUPPORT NATURAL BIRTH

If a mom chooses the natural method, she will need to make sure that the facility really does support natural birth. Here are a few that do.

- **Healthy Mother Natural Birthing Centre, The Sanctum, Hyderabad:** Located within J J Hospital, this birthing centre is run by Dr. Vijaya Krishnan.
- **Phoenix Hospital, Delhi:** Dr. Urvashi Sehgal, an ob-gyn, who supports natural birth, runs the nursing home.
- **Chrysalis Nursing Home, Mumbai:** Run by Drs. Manish and Manjari Gawde, ob-gyns, this nursing home supports natural birth.
- **Birth Village, Kochi:** Run by Lamaze-certified childbirth educator and doula, Priyanka Idicula. There is a team of midwives and doulas and a home-like environment.
- **Birthing Center, Goa:** It is run by a German midwife Corinna Stahlhofen. It offers a personal, holistic experience. It is affiliated to other birth-related practitioners (teachers of parenting classes, yoga for pregnant women).

## A doctor can intervene in an emergency, in a hospital that supports natural birth.

### REAL LIFE

"My older son who was 3½ didn't face any trauma since I had a home birth. I fed him dinner and was there to give him breakfast as well after the birth of my second child."

—Delna Sanghvi, mom to Shariq, 14, and Rihan, 10, Mumbai



"I had a long labour, but the use of a hydrotherapy tub towards the end relaxed me so much that my fatigue just melted away and I was able to go on and give birth to my little one." 

—Abhilasha Thakur, mom to Shaurya, 9 months, born at Sanctum Birthing Centre, Hyderabad



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