



## What is a Doula and Why Hire One?

The Greek word Doula can be loosely translated to mean "woman's servant" in the English language. However, in childbirth terminology, this word describes a woman who tends to the needs of the laboring woman. Not to be confused with midwives, who are medical professionals; Doulas rather support mothers and their partners exclusively on the emotional, psychological and physical level. They are not trained, nor is it within their scope of practice to perform any medical tests or to deliver babies.

A Doula in action at a birth can often be found massaging a woman in between contractions, whispering supportive words in the mother's ear, wiping the sweat from her brow, making suggestions for laboring positions, as well as being an emotional support to the baby's father, etc.

Basically, a Doula does whatever is needed to help the birthing woman achieve the type of birth experience she desires, in whatever manner is appropriate for that individual woman and her family.

Historically, all over the world, birth was most often attended by mothers, aunts, sisters or other women relatives and friends of the birthing woman. Unfortunately, with the dawn of colonization in North America (which resulted in the social isolation of women), women began to birth without their much needed women-to-women care.

When male obstetricians, became involved in childbirth, the social and spiritually transformative nature of birth became reduced to a medical emergency that women and babies need to be saved from. The value of bringing female birth attendants/Doulas back into birth, should not be underestimated, for this shift is now showing to improve the quality of a woman's experience of birth.

Doulas are improving the way women give birth. A paper published in the American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology showed in a meta-analysis of several Doula studies that when Doulas were present, there was a 36% reduction in the use of pain medications, 51% reduction in C-sections, 71% reduction in the use of oxytocin, 57% reduction in forceps deliveries, and labors were 1 hr. and 38 minutes shorter.

So, just how do Doulas improve birth statistics and empower women to have a better psychological, emotional, physical and sometimes even spiritually transformative experience of birth?

Through loving "hands on healing" and by "holding the space" (allowing a mother to truly feel safe in her chosen birth environment) a Doula assists her to attain the conscious attention and focus she needs to stay with the process, thus enabling her to yield to, rather than resist

the powerful birthing energies or power.

While a Doula's presence can help reduce the pain and fear that often resides both in the mind and body of the laboring women, the real work of the Doula comes before the birth. It is the Doula's role to provide information, encouragement and birth options prenatally helping mothers to make informed choices when it comes to their health and well-being during pregnancy, birth and for the care of their newborn. A Doula can help pregnant women realistically evaluate the benefits vs. the risks associated with the many and often unnecessary routine prenatal tests and birth interventions.

Instead of finding themselves surprised by the techno-medical birth climate of our day, women who have a Doula by their side or to consult with, have access to many more resources as well as the Doula's knowledge and experience. A Doula distills complicated medical jargon into practical application, helping women to understand what each test and intervention is, and when it may be used appropriately or inappropriately. A woman who understands her choices and the associated risks or benefits, can confidently and consciously object to tests and protocols that she does not feel are of benefit to her own or her baby's health.

Women who enlist the services of a Doula, beginning early in pregnancy, have the opportunity to more carefully consider their choice of caregiver and place of birth. Many a pregnant woman who upon becoming increasingly more educated and informed as their pregnancy progresses, have expressed wishing they had known earlier, what they know now. They find themselves stuck "between a rock and a hard place". Some choose to change the entire course of their care (a considerable stress in pregnancy). Such a situation can be prevented by hiring a Doula and reviewing the many options in childbirth, before choosing a route of care.

Beyond informational and educational support, one of the most, if not the most important role of the Doula, is to provide social-emotional support through nurturing.

On the psychological and spiritual level, Doulas are invaluable. For most women birthing in hospitals, visits with their Obstetrician consist of an average of 5 minutes of medical evaluation and next to no emotional support. The Doula, to a pregnant woman is her confidant. She offers guidance, unconditional support and an open heart to assist mothers in overcoming their personal challenges.

The Doula offers insight and suggestions that can assist the mom to work on and move through her fears prior to giving birth. She is often the only person in the mother's life who wholeheartedly believes in the mother's ability to give birth naturally and in a woman's body to inherently be capable of birthing, without complication. A Holistic Doula often honors and celebrates the mother, by facilitating a mother blessing for her. A mother blessing is a woman's gathering held to acknowledge the significance of becoming a mother and giving birth. A mother blessing often includes culture specific honoring rituals, song and a potluck. Guests are encouraged to bring extra foods for the mother's freezer to ensure there are healthy homemade meals at hand after the baby is born.

As well as social-emotional support, a Holistic Doula can provide preventative prenatal care.

For example, a Holistic Doula who has a good knowledge of nutrition and natural therapies, can support a pregnant woman, by offering her practical suggestions in the realm of diet,

supplements, herbal and homeopathic remedies to improve the mother's general well-being, preventing and naturally treat common pregnancy concerns. During the postpartum, a Holistic Doula can provide light housekeeping and meal preparation, plus rejuvenating postpartum therapies, such as moxibustion, uterine massage, herbal sitz baths, nourishing infusions and belly wrapping. All making for a smooth and nourishing transition into motherhood.

For most North American women, pregnancy and the first year of motherhood can be a lonely and isolating experience. Hiring the services of a Holistic Doula, trained in natural therapies and postnatal care can ease the transition into motherhood and bring joy to a woman's experience of pregnancy and birth.

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