Natural Ways to Encourage Labor

For the past 40 weeks you have been waiting for this moment. Your birth plan is written, your bag is packed, your belly feels like it is about to burst and you are sure that any minute now you will feel your first contraction. And then... nothing. Not even a twinge.

Now there is something to be said for being patient. Your baby will come out when s/he is ready and some just like to take their time. But if an induction date and medical intervention is looming, you might feel like you want to give him/her a gentle nudge. Here are some of the alternative methods of bringing on labor.

Before you proceed, we should warn you that there is very little hard scientific evidence relating to either the effectiveness, or the safety of any of these methods. The studies that have been done tend to be small and evidence is difficult to verify: if labor is due any way, how do you know whether it was the curry you ate last night that actually brought it on?

Be sure to talk to your midwife or doctor at your next check-up before you try any of these methods. This is particularly important if there are any complications in your pregnancy, as there is even less evidence about the safety of these methods in a high-risk pregnancy.

Various methods of natural and non-medical ways to ripen the cervix and induce labor include:

**Relaxation**— Use relaxation techniques taught in any childbirth class. Use visual imagery of labor beginning. The most important thing to do is to find a way to relieve tension. Tension works against labor. Relieve it, let everything go, and you may be surprised to find yourself in labor.

**Visualization**— Get quiet and relaxed and imagine your uterus contracting as well as the process of labor hypnosis or self-hypnosis has been known to really do wonders with this one.

**Nipple Stimulation**— Nipple stimulation is the gentle rubbing or rolling of the nipple to encourage the start of contractions. The theory is that oxytocin, a hormone that causes contractions is released in the body when the breasts are stimulated. A review of studies found that contractions after nipple stimulation did not over-stimulate the uterus, which could be dangerous for the baby. There is a lack of research on the safety of this technique in high risk pregnancies, so currently it is only recommended in normal pregnancies.
Sex — Sex as a means of getting labor started is thought to work in three ways: first, orgasm may help to stimulate the uterus into action. Secondly, sex can trigger the release of oxytocin, and third, semen contains a high concentration of prostaglandins which may help to ripen or soften the cervix. Sex is safe as long as your waters have not broken. Once this has happened, making love may increase the risk of infection. You should also avoid sex if you have a low-lying placenta (placenta previa) or have had vaginal bleeding. Men often feel uncomfortable making love to their partners with a baby so obviously present, but the baby will be unharmed.

Homeopathy — Homeopathic remedies use highly diluted versions of more potent substances to treat the body. Pulsatilla and Caulophyllum are two commonly used homeopathic remedies used to stimulate labor. These remedies appear to be safe. The Faculty of Homeopathy has researched their use in labor and not found any incidents of damage caused by them. There are plenty of anecdotal evidence from patients who found that homeopathy is helpful, but this has not been researched in a systematic way. One trial into caulophyllum found no difference between the women who took it and those who did not take it. Contact a registered homeopath for further information.

Walking — The explanation appears to be that the pressure of your baby’s head pressing down on the cervix stimulates the release of oxytocin, hopefully bringing on labor, also just being upright gets the forces of gravity working for you, encouraging the baby to move down into the pelvis. Be careful not to wear yourself out. Labor can be exhausting and you don’t want to use up all your energy before you have begun. This is not the moment to take up power walking, particularly if you have not done much exercise earlier on in your pregnancy. A gentle stroll is probably the best you will be able to manage.

Herbs — Two combinations of herbs are available and both combinations can have beneficial effects to soften and thin the cervix.

(a) PN6 (PreNatal 6 = Squaw Vine Herb, Blessed Thistle Herb, Black Cohosh Root, Pennyroyal Herb, False Unicorn Root, Red Raspberry Leaf, and Lobelia Herb) – can be used for the last 6 weeks of pregnancy as directed;
(b) **5W** (5 Weeks = Black cohosh root, squaw vine herb, dong quai root, butcher’s broom root and red raspberry leaves) can be used for the last 5 weeks of pregnancy as directed.

**Evening Primrose Oil**— found in 500 mg capsules. These may be taken orally or vaginally - one to three capsules 3 times each day for the last 4 weeks of pregnancy to soften and thin the cervix.

**Raspberry Leaf Tea**— drink to your heart’s content. Used to help organize contractions and tone the muscles of the uterus.

There are many herbal combinations in capsules, teas, and tinctures. Many health providers encourage their use, but as scientific studies are lacking, we do not recommend any of these preparations at this time due to safety issues.

**Foods**— Women searching for foods that induce labor will turn to other mothers who swear it was the extra-spicy entrée from their favorite Mexican restaurant that brought them face to face with their new baby, but with a full stomach during labor, you might just see that entrée in a very unappetizing light.

Unfortunately, the statistics are out on this one, there is simply not enough research to support that any foods are effective in inducing labor. Anecdotally, women have sworn the following are foods that will induce labor: Pineapple, Spicy foods, Chinese Foods, Eggplant Parmesan, and Licorice.

The most well-known of these would have to be spicy foods, like hot peppers or any other spicy Mexican dish. What the research is now showing is that these foods may be something to avoid prior to labor. Certain spicy foods release capsaicin, which may be counterproductive in labor. When the baby descends down the birth path, the pressure exerted releases endorphins which are a natural pain killer. In effect, the capsaicin counteract the endorphins and rob the mother of her natural ability to have a pain-free birth.

The eggplant parmesan was also in vogue for a time. While this dish may have been contributing to labor, it is probably not due to the eggplant but rather to the seasonings in the dish. Both basil and oregano are herbs contraindicated in pregnancy due to their potential ability to start labor.

Pineapple is not supposed to induce labor, but rather is thought to be a cervical ripening agent that stimulates prostaglandins, although this has not been proven.
Licorice, real licorice candy, the black kind, is thought to also stimulate the production of prostaglandins. This is due to the chemical, glycyrrhizin. Eating lots of licorice might also result in mild diarrhea, which causes intestinal contractions that may lead to sympathetic uterine contractions. This type of licorice can also be found in tablet form. Again, no definitive research suggests that licorice can induce labor. When looking for foods that induce labor, only consume them if they are something you normally select. There's just not enough evidence to say they work for certain, and in which cases they may cause more harm than help, so the choice is yours. Enemas or other bowel preparations (castor oil) - This causes the bowels to contract and could cause the uterus to contract. Use with caution as castor oil can cause vicious diarrhea. A small Fleets Plain enema is easy to use, and less likely to have severe effects.

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