

Doula study in the July 2008 issue of BIRTH Magazine

A randomized controlled trial of continuous labor support for middle-class couples: effect on cesarean delivery rates.

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Abstract

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BACKGROUND:

Previous randomized controlled studies in several different settings demonstrated the positive effects of continuous labor support by an experienced woman (doula) for low income women laboring without the support of family members. The objective of this randomized controlled trial was to examine the perinatal effects of doula support for nulliparous middle-income women accompanied by a male partner during labor and delivery.

METHODS:

Nulliparous women in the third trimester of an uncomplicated pregnancy were enrolled at childbirth education classes in Cleveland, Ohio. Of the 686 prenatal women recruited, 420 met enrollment criteria and completed the intervention. For the 224 women randomly assigned to the experimental group, a doula arrived shortly after hospital admission and remained throughout labor and delivery. The Doula support included close physical proximity, touch, and eye contact with the laboring woman, and teaching, reassurance, and encouragement of the woman and her male partner.

RESULTS:

The doula group had a significantly lower cesarean delivery rate than the control group (13.4% vs 25.0%, $p = 0.002$), and fewer women in the doula group received epidural analgesia (64.7% vs 76.0%, $p = 0.008$). Among women with induced labor, those supported by a doula had a lower rate of cesarean delivery than those in the control group (12.5% vs 58.8%, $p = 0.007$). On questionnaires the day after delivery, 100 percent of couples with doula support rated their experience with the doula positively.

CONCLUSIONS:

For middle-class women laboring with the support of their male partner, the continuous presence of a doula during labor significantly decreased the likelihood of cesarean delivery and reduced the need for epidural analgesia. Women and their male partners were unequivocal in their positive opinions about laboring with the support of an experienced doula.

Catherine's note: Keep in mind that the laboring mother's had never even met the doulas before receiving care from them in labor. These results, profound though they are, would be even more impressive if the women and their partners had begun to work with an experienced doula during the prenatal period.