

Why Labor is Good for Babies

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A few years ago I was sitting in a lecture series designed for birth professionals. I have to admit I was beginning to doze, as it was right after lunch. Then something the physician said made me jolt upright in my chair. Labor was good for babies.

Considering everything I'd ever heard from women, doctors and even some midwives, I never thought I'd ever hear those words. So many people talk of fetal distress and the dangers of birth for the baby. This man was telling me that in general labor is great for babies.

Basically what it boils down to is that the stress of labor is a good stress. As the mother labors her body produces hormones to help her deal with pain. As she does this her baby's adrenal glands are stimulated and they begin to produce high levels of catecholamines, or stress hormones.

The catecholamines are the same ones that everyone's bodies produce in the flight or fight response to a life threatening situation or stressful event. This fetal stress response is designed to help the baby make the transition to life outside the uterus.

Here is how it helps specifically:

- **Helps baby breathe.** The hormones produced increase the levels of surfactant that are secreted, this helps the newborn keep their lungs expanded. As it keeps the lungs open it helps the baby to clear amniotic fluid from his or her lungs.
- **Increases blood flow to baby.** Stress hormones help send more blood to the baby's brain, heart and kidneys.
- **Increase energy supply to the baby.** This is what keeps the baby satisfied until breast milk comes in.
- **Facilitates bonding.** That alertness your newborn has is directly related to these hormones. A more alert baby draws parents in and he or she is more responsive to parents and others.
- **Increases immunity.** White blood cell numbers are increased as the adrenal hormones are secreted.

Studies have shown that while epidural anesthesia does not effect the levels of catecholamines, there is a significant difference in babies who are born vaginally versus planned cesarean. Even if a cesarean becomes necessary during labor, even early on, the baby has more catecholamines and responds better to extra uterine life than counterparts born via scheduled cesarean prior to the onset of labor. For this reason many practitioners will delay elective cesarean until after the onset of labor when possible.

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