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Vital Signs

Childbirth: Rethinking the Big Push During Contractions

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A new study is raising questions about one of the most accepted practices in the delivery room: urging women to push during contractions to help the baby come out.

The researchers, writing in the current issue of *The American Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology*, say there is no evidence that bearing down during contractions helps either the mother or the child. They also suggest that women who are encouraged to push may be at higher risk for urinary problems after delivery.

The lead author of the study, Dr. Steven L. Bloom of the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, said the study did not mean that women should never push. Instead, he said, the message is "to do what feels natural to do - and for some women that would be no pushing."

The finding does not mean that coaches are not helpful during childbirth, only that they should not emphasize pushing.

For the study, researchers looked at the birth experiences of more than 300 women.

Half were assigned nurse-midwives who encouraged them to take deep breaths, hold them and bear down for 10 seconds at the peak of a contraction. The other women were assigned nurse-midwives who told them to do what felt best.

The women who were told to push did have shorter deliveries. On average, the study found, their second stage of labor was about 13 minutes shorter.

While it is unclear how the practice of encouraging women to push came about (the researchers say it was not in the medical literature before 1950), Dr. Bloom said part of the goal might have been to decrease the amount of time women were in discomfort.

The question, he said, is whether it is worth it.