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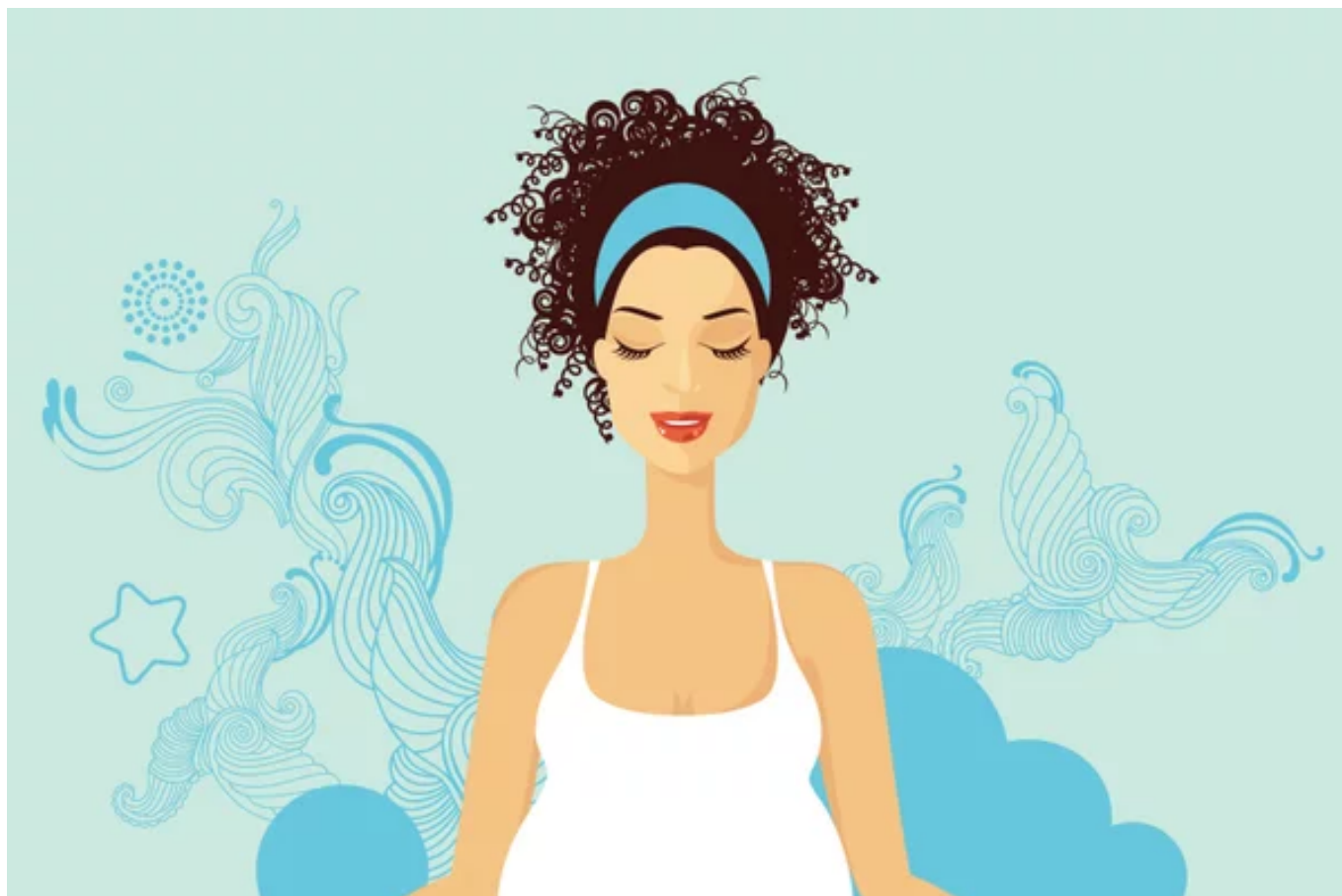
Doulas: Exploring A Tradition Of Support

July 14, 2011 · 10:40 AM ET

COBURN DUKEHART

Baby Project mom Lucy Peck was initially going to use a doula for her birth, but has since decided to have her sister act as a birth companion. Regardless, we decided to explore the topic more to find out exactly, "What is a doula?"

I reached out to two doulas to better explain who they are, what they do, and how they can assist mothers during labor and delivery.





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Leda Ward is a DONA-certified labor support doula and a certified lactation counselor in New York. **Robin Elise Weiss** is a childbirth educator, certified doula and lactation consultant, and the author of several books, including *The Complete Illustrated Pregnancy Companion* and *The About.com Guide to Having a Baby*. She also blogs about pregnancy and childbirth for About.com.

What is a doula?

The word "doula" comes from ancient Greek, meaning "a woman who serves." Today, "doula" refers to a professional trained to provide emotional, physical and informational support to women throughout their pregnancy, birth and the early postpartum period.

Doulas can assist women with births at home, in the hospital or at a birth center, and they provide pain management techniques, reassurance and advocacy in the labor room.

According to Ward, the role of the doula is an ancient one. Years ago, when women exclusively gave birth at home in the care of skilled midwives, women had their female

family members support and guide them. But with the development of obstetrics and hospital births in the last century, women became estranged from the birth process, and family members lost sufficient knowledge and confidence to guide a woman.

To fulfill women's need for birth support in modern times, the professional doula arose in the 1970s and '80s.

How do doulas differ from midwives?

A midwife is a medical professional who can provide the same type of care as an obstetrician in the course of a low-risk pregnancy and labor. During labor and delivery, medical care is still in the hands of the midwife or doctor, and the doula becomes an addition to the birth team rather than a replacement.

According to Ward, while doulas do not provide medical care or advice, they can help a mother have a shorter labor, often without the need for pain medication, by providing constant guidance and support.

How do doulas assist the mother during birth?

Weiss says that many women who give birth in hospitals don't realize they may be completely alone for periods of time. Nurses are usually available, but can't spend every moment with a patient. A doula is with the mother at all times during labor, offering guidance and support.

Doulas might suggest positions to help labor move faster, or for the mother to be more comfortable, even when medications are used. They can also suggest comfort measures such as massage, warm compresses, laboring in a shower or with a birth ball.

Additional services might be keeping family members calm and secure, helping to navigate the hospital or birth center system, offering breast-feeding help after the birth, and identifying support systems to help the postpartum period go more smoothly.

What are the benefits of using a doula?

According to Weiss, using a doula can help women have a shorter labor, be less likely to have a cesarean, be less likely to need pain medication, and be less likely to have a forceps delivery.

Ward also says that women are more likely to report a positive experience of their birth and are better able to bond with their babies when using a doula, which has the added benefit of reducing risk factors for postpartum depression.

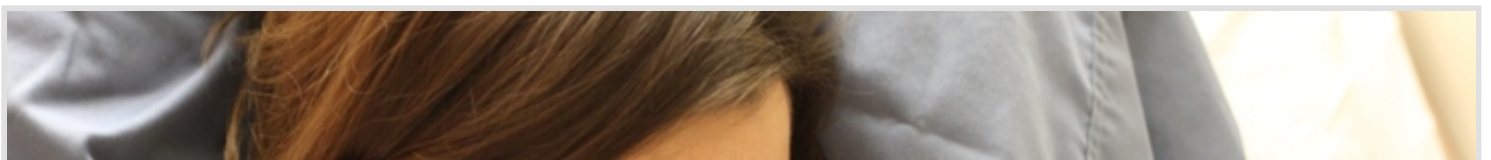
Did you use a doula during your birth? Tell us about your experience.

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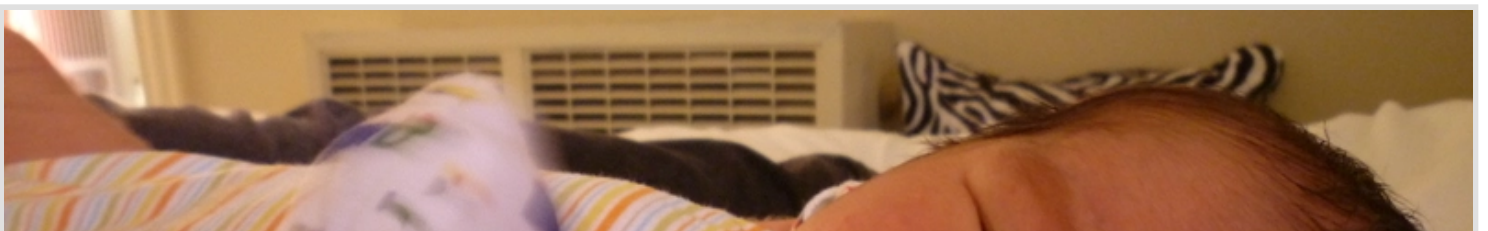
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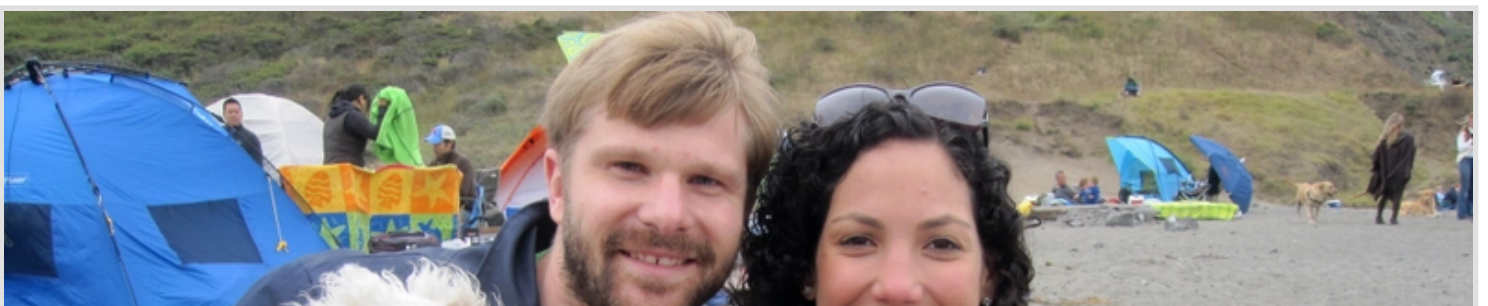




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