

Birth partners



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Who is a birth partner?

A birth partner is someone you choose to have with you during your labour. They are with you to provide emotional and practical support and encouragement in addition to the health professionals offering you clinical care.

You can choose to have your partner, a family member, or a friend to be your birth partner. You can choose a professional birth partner such as a doula. You can usually have a professional birth partner as well as a birth partner from your family or friendship group.

You can decide not to have a birth partner, or you can have more than one. You do not have to have your partner as a birth partner if that doesn't work for you as a couple/family.

If you don't have anyone who can be your birth partner, there may be a charity or support service near you which offers volunteer (free) emotional support for birth. If you are facing particularly challenging life circumstances as you prepare to labour and give birth, you may be able to have support during labour from a charity such as [Birth Companions](#).

Right to choose your birth partner

Those caring for you should respect your choice of birth partner or partners during your labour. Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights protects every person's right to make choices about their private and family life and this includes choices about birth partners. (See our factsheet [Human Rights in Maternity Care](#).)

You should be given proper opportunities to explain who you wish to be with you during your labour. Your choices should be carefully considered by midwives and other medical staff and should not be restricted or refused unless there is a proportionate justification – a good, evidence-based, reason – to do so in your individual case.

In order for a hospital's reason to restrict choice of birth partner to be justified, there must be a legitimate need being met by the restriction, such as protection of staff or the public, and that restriction must be a proportionate way to meet that need. An example of a justification might be if a birth partner has previously been violent towards health professionals.

What if the hospital's policy says I can't have more than one birth partner?

Hospitals sometimes have a policy that says how many birth partners are allowed in the labour room or in theatre if the space is too small to accommodate additional people.

Even if your hospital has such a policy, healthcare professionals must make reasonable adjustments if you have a disability or long-term health condition (See our factsheet: [Disability and long term health conditions and maternity care](#) and the [Equality Act 2010](#)).

Even if you do not have a disability or Health Condition under the [Equality Act 2010](#), hospital staff should also consider making an exception if you need the support of more than one birth partner for other reasons. They must listen to you respectfully and take account of your personal needs and what will help you to feel safe, for example:

- If you experience anxiety and you would like your partner and your mother with you.
- If you live with trauma from a previous birth or hospital experience and you would like both a doula and your partner to be with you during an induction.
- If you are having a caesarean birth with twins and would like your partner to be able to stay longer with you postnatally.
- If a friend drives you to hospital and stays with you until your birth partner arrives.

The [Equality Act 2010](#) says that healthcare professionals must take special care to ensure that people who are disabled or have a long term health condition, or who use languages other than English, all have the support they need. This means that if you need support from, for example, a carer or an interpreter (spoken or signing), they should not be counted as a birth partner and should be facilitated to be with you during birth as an additional and necessary support.

How many birth partners can I have at my home birth?

If you are having a home birth you can choose how many birth partners you wish to have with you. If you transfer to hospital at any point, you may only be able to have one or two partners come with you. Hospitals should respect your choice of a doula in the same way that they respect your choice to have a family member or another person present during your labour.

In rare cases your healthcare providers may still raise a valid objection to a particular birth partner being at a home birth. Key examples of this are if the birth partner has a history of violence towards other professionals or if the birth partner is known to be currently ill with a serious disease such as flu. In such rare cases your maternity team should work with you to respectfully consider alternative plans.

Can I have a professional birth partner?

You can choose a professional birth partner, who is known as a doula. They can give you emotional support and be your advocate during labour. Being an advocate means that they can help you to communicate your wishes and your informed decisions during labour. You should usually be able to have a professional birth partner (doula) as well as your chosen birth partner from your family or friends.

Doulas have often undergone additional training to support people in childbirth. Their role is to offer physical and emotional support, and advocacy during labour. They are not midwives and must not act in the role of a midwife. If they do, they may be committing a criminal offence.

- You can read more about the law and what 'acting in the role of a midwife' means on our factsheet [Unassisted birth](#).

If you are giving birth at home, you could also choose to be looked after by a private or independent midwife. This is most common in situations where you are choosing private care for a home birth. In this situation if you transfer to an NHS hospital then the hospital midwives will take over your clinical care, but your private or independent midwife should be able to stay as a birth companion.

You can read more about choosing private midwifery care on our factsheet [Your right to choose your midwife and doctor](#).

Can my birth partner consent to treatment for me or my baby?

Only you can give informed consent to any medical treatment or surgery that is offered to you. Your birth partner cannot give consent for you. However, they may be able to help you to make your wishes known by speaking up for you to health professionals. They may also be able to make it clear to the health professionals that you do not feel able to make an informed decision in that moment (due to pain or another reason) and that you need more time/clearer respectful communication in order to be able to make a decision. This can especially happen if you are being asked to sign a long, written consent form while things are changing during your labour.

In an emergency, if you cannot say what you want to happen because you are unconscious, health professionals can give you treatment to save your life or stop your condition from getting much worse. If there is time, the healthcare team should talk to your next of kin about any decisions. Your next of kin cannot consent to treatment for you but healthcare professionals should listen to them and respect what they say about what you might want for your care.

- [The Patients' Association](#) has information about next of kin

Once the baby has been born then only someone with parental responsibility for the baby can give consent to its medical treatment. The person giving birth always has parental responsibility. The situation is different for birth partners: some birth partners have automatic parental responsibility, and some do not.

- You can find a summary of who has parental responsibility on the [UK government's website](#).
- You can read more about consent on our factsheet [Consenting to treatment](#).

Can my birth partner stay with me after the birth?

Hospitals sometimes have their own internal rules (a policy) about whether your birth partner can stay with you after the birth, and for how long.

There can be some good reasons to limit how many people there are on postnatal wards, for example, if the ward is small. However, healthcare professionals should apply their internal rules flexibly and sensitively, in a way that upholds your human right to a family and private life. Healthcare professionals should always be prepared to consider making an exception when needed.

Healthcare professionals should give you time to explain if you have particular reasons for wanting your birth partner to stay longer with you. These could include that you had a c-section, your baby is ill, or because you have had twins. It could also be part of a reasonable adjustment that you are entitled to under [the Equality Act 2010](#).

Healthcare professionals should listen carefully to your reasons and allow your birth partner to stay unless there is a good, evidence-based reason not to, that takes account of your human rights under Article 8. They could consider whether there are ways to allow your partner to stay even if this is against the usual policy, for example, by providing a room off the ward. If you need your partner to stay as a 'reasonable adjustment' because you have a disability or long-term health condition, you should discuss this with your midwife during your pregnancy so that you may be supported to plan for any extra assistance you may need post birth.

You can read more about reasonable adjustments in our factsheet, [Disability, and long-term health conditions: your right to reasonable adjustments in maternity care](#).

- If you need to make a complaint about birth partners you can contact our advice team [on our advice form here](#). You can also read more about this in our factsheet [Making a complaint](#).

About Birthrights

Birthrights factsheets give you information about your human rights when you are pregnant and giving birth. Contact Birthrights for help on our [advice form](#).

Birthrights champions respectful care during pregnancy and childbirth by protecting human rights. We provide advice and information to women and birthing people, train doctors and midwives, and campaign to change maternity policy and systems.

We are a charity, independent of the government and the NHS.

www.birthrights.org.uk

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