



Birth & Lactation Support for a Healthy First 1,000 Days

About 1,000 Days

1,000 Days is the leading nonprofit organization working to ensure women and children in the U.S. and around the world have the healthiest first 1,000 days. As an initiative of FHI Solutions, our mission is to make the well-being of women and children in the first 1,000 days a policy and funding priority.

Birth Doulas

Historically across cultures, women have accompanied and supported one another during labor. There is a growing body of evidence that companionship during labor leads to improved birth outcomes for both mother and child, with lower overall costs due to reduced rates of medical interventions and surgical births.

Maternity care and birth outcomes in the United States

- The U.S. maternal mortality rate is markedly higher than 10 other high-income countries (24.7 vs. mean 8.4 per 100,000 live births).
- Cesarean sections comprise 31.9% of U.S. births, a 54% increase from 1996 to 2018, and are associated with increases in maternal morbidity and mortality.
- Compared with white women, Black and Hispanic women are 1.7 and 1.2 times more likely to experience severe maternal morbidities, and Black and American Indian or Alaskan Native women are 3.3 and 2.5 times more likely to die from pregnancy related causes. Racism, unequal treatment, and inequities in health care access are determinants of adverse maternal outcomes.
- Maternity and newborn care accounts for 7.6% of U.S. hospital costs, totaling over \$27 billion annually. State Medicaid programs cover 45% of these costs.

What is a birth doula?

A birth doula is a trained non-medical professional who provides continuous support during labor and the immediate postpartum period to help a mother achieve a healthy and satisfying childbirth. The role of a doula includes:

1. Informational support about birth and bridging communication gaps with the provider
2. Practical support, encouraging the mother to remain mobile during labor
3. Emotional support such as praise, encouragement, and comfort measures
4. Advocating for the mother's perinatal preferences

How do birth doulas improve birth outcomes?

Clinical Benefits

- Reduced cesarean birth rate (↓40%)
- Shortened duration of labor
- Reduced epidural and assisted vaginal delivery rates
- Improved 5-minute Apgar scores
- Reduced incidence of postpartum depression
- Increased breastfeeding initiation and duration

Social and Economic Benefits

- Increased satisfaction with childbirth experience
- Increased maternal-infant bonding
- Reduced racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic disparities in birth outcomes
- Reduced cost burden due to fewer medical interventions and associated morbidities

"Doulas can be particularly beneficial for women of color and women from low-income and underserved communities and can help reduce health disparities by ensuring that pregnant people who face the greatest risks have the added support they need."

Lactation Consultants

Breastfeeding provides powerful benefits for both infants and their mothers. Babies who are breastfed have a lower risk of asthma, infections, sudden infant death syndrome, and obesity and diabetes later in life. Mothers who breastfeed are less likely to develop breast cancer, ovarian cancer, type 2 diabetes, or high blood pressure. The American Academy of Pediatrics and the CDC recommend initiation of breastfeeding within the first hour of life, exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months, and continued breastfeeding at least through 12 months as complementary foods are gradually introduced.

Breastfeeding in the United States

Most mothers in the U.S. breastfeed - but 3 in 5 do not meet their breastfeeding goals. According to the CDC, 84.1% of U.S. mothers initiate breastfeeding, but only 25.6% breastfeed exclusively for 6 months in accordance with recommendations.

What is a lactation consultant?

Lactation consultants are healthcare professionals who specialize in the clinical management of breastfeeding. Professional support is especially important in the first few weeks postpartum, when lactation is being established. A systematic review of 16 randomized trials found that lactation consultants increased the number of women initiating breastfeeding by 35% and the number of women still breastfeeding exclusively at 1 month by 71%.

Benefits of professional lactation support

Clinical Benefits

- Increased breastfeeding initiation
- Prevention of early breastfeeding cessation
- Longer duration of exclusive breastfeeding
- Indirect benefits of breastfeeding (e.g., reduced infant morbidity, enhanced maternal-infant bonding)

Social Benefits

- Increased maternal confidence in breastfeeding
- Improved maternal mental health, including reduced postpartum depression
- Increased engagement with health care
- Improved infant immunization rates

In Her Words: Birth Doula & Lactation Consultants

"My birthing process would not have been as comforting as it was without [my doula's] expertise, patience and willingness to work with me. [My doula was] such a good listener...she definitely changed my perception with the concerns I had about the birthing process."

"With the arduous labor we went through I am certain things went better with [my doula's] involvement, suggestions and calm presence. Her unwavering help was an unbelievable blessing."

"I imagined breastfeeding [my 4th baby] would come as natural to me as it did the 3 other babies I had each already nursed well over 12 months. [But] he wouldn't latch easily. I couldn't get a position to encourage him to open his mouth. Just 4 days after he was born and I woke up to an actual bleeding nipple. I sat in bed crying from pain disappointment and guilt. [...] I called my WIC office and left a message for the lactation consultant [...] And I had an appointment within an hour. [...] She helped find positions that would work for my baby and me. [...] She also gave me instructions to heal my nipples. I saw her again about 4 more times in the following weeks. She was always so encouraging and helpful. [...] She literally helped my breastfeeding story continue with my sweet babe and I will forever love her for it!"