

Choosing a Caregiver

Finding the caregiver who is the best match for your needs is one of the most crucial steps in preparing for your birth.

The first step in choosing a caregiver is to decide what your priorities are. Imagine what you would like your birth to be like. What are the top three or four priorities for you? Different families will have different priorities. Some may want to avoid an episiotomy. Some may want to ensure medical pain relief is available immediately on request. Some may want to go into labor spontaneously (instead of having an induction). Some may want a high level of medical supervision. Some may want to give birth off the bed. You might want ALL these things, or something completely different. Your doula can assist you as you get to know your options and identify your priorities.

Styles of Care

The caregiver you choose provides you with professional medical care and expertise, but the person who is ultimately responsible for your care, and your baby's care, is you. One of the most surprising things to learn is that medicine is as much a skilled art as it is a science. And the "art" part means that for most things relating to pregnancy and birth, there are differences of opinion on what you might do. Safety is the top priority for everyone involved in birth, but there can be different opinions on how to be safe! There are all sorts of practitioners who care for people during pregnancy, including obstetricians, family doctors (general practitioners), nurse-midwives, direct-entry midwives, registered midwives, and lay midwives. Each caregiver will have their own way of working and approach to birth. Not all doctors, or midwives, are the same or have the same views! Most of the time, they will fall into one of two camps.

Active Management

The first approach is called "active management." Practitioners of this style generally believe the safest way to handle birth is to be "active" using medical methods of controlling the process to try to prevent problems from arising. Active management uses routine procedures for everyone -- sort of like a "set menu" in a restaurant where everyone eats the set meal the chef is skilled at preparing. Some people feel very safe and cared for with this approach, which relies heavily on the caregiver to make decisions.

Expectant Management

The other approach is called "expectant management." Practitioners of this style generally believe the safest way to manage birth is to observe carefully but to "do" as little as possible unless there's a specific problem arising in an individual's birth. Little is done routinely because routine interventions are recognized to introduce their own risks. Expectant management is like a full a la carte menu where you can choose from a range of different dishes depending on what you like and avoiding foods that don't agree with you.

Making the Choice

Once you've decided what your priorities are, and you understand the range of possibilities caregivers may offer, you can ask friends for recommendations. Keep in mind whether your friends had the same or very different priorities from you! Did they prefer the set meal or the a la carte menu? If they were looking for a very different experience from you their recommendation might not be appropriate for you.

Once you have some names to consider, try meeting with two or three caregivers, or even more, to decide who you feel most comfortable with. Remember, the key is a good match. Your priorities, or a caregiver's approach, are not "good" or "bad" in themselves. They are what's right for you, and what's right for the caregiver. What's important is making a good match between what you want and what your caregiver will feel comfortable providing. Don't expect to go to an Italian restaurant and ask for Japanese food! It can be hard work to find a supportive caregiver. But doing the work before your birth can avoid stressful tensions arising in late pregnancy or during your labor. Remember, your doula can help you through this process. That's what they are there for!

Interviewing Caregivers

When you meet with a caregiver, ask open questions. Open questions are ones that have to be answered with an explanation, not just a "yes" or a "no." If you want to avoid an episiotomy, ask "how often do you find it necessary to cut an episiotomy?" If the caregiver says it's necessary a lot of the time, keep talking to others who demonstrate with their practice that routine episiotomies aren't happening.