

BIRTHING BAG GUIDE

Your birthing bag should contain everything you'll need whilst in hospital to ensure you're as comfortable as possible. Even if you're planning a home birth, it's worth having these items assembled or packed in case you need to be transferred to hospital.

What you'll need

- Birth Plan

You create a birthing plan based on the advice of medical staff. The purpose of it is to communicate to midwives and doctors what type of labour and birth you are hoping for so they can support this where possible. You should be given a sample plan by your midwife, but they are also available on the NHS website:

http://www.nhs.uk/planners/pregnancyareplanner/pages/birthplan.aspx?WT.mc_id=070906

- Medical Notes

Early in your pregnancy, medical staff will start to compile your medical notes. These will record scan details, your blood pressure, urine and blood results, any medical conditions you may have and your family's medical history. This allows doctors and midwives to see all relevant details of your pregnancy and medical condition at a glance. You must have this when you go into labour.

If you're not familiar with you family's medical history, start finding out. You should also check what blood group you are.

You may find the NHS Pregnancy Planner useful:

<http://www.nhs.uk/Planners/pregnancyareplanner/pages/Antenatalcare.aspx>

- Money and small change

Whether it's for the car park, the café or vending machines, you'll need cash and small change. Even in the most hurried arrival to hospital you'll be expected to pay for your parking, so have some small change ready. Some hospitals will offer a day pass at the maternity unit reception and it's worth checking if this is available because it's much cheaper.

- Birthing outfit

This is just something to wear whilst you're giving birth. It needs to be loose and comfortable - an oversized t-shirt, pyjama top or nightie would work well. It's nice if it's front opening as that will allow skin to skin contact when your baby first arrives. Bear in mind you may well end up throwing your birthing outfit away afterwards!

- 5 pairs of knickers

These are going to get mucky, so you either need old underwear that you're happy to throw away afterwards, or black, cheap or disposable underwear.

- 3 lots of front opening nightwear

There are two reasons to have front opening nightwear. It will allow skin to skin contact with your baby when it's first born, and will make breastfeeding easier. Avoid anything too warm, as labour wards tend to get very hot. As with everything you take to hospital, it could end up being stained, so don't take your favourite pair of PJs.

- Dressing gown

This is just nice to have when you're walking round the hospital or on an open ward - you'll just feel less exposed with a dressing gown on.

- Slippers or flip flops

You'll just need these so you're not walking round the hospital barefoot.

- Snacks

You could be at the hospital for hours, and you're unlikely to get more than a sandwich. Labour is a real calorie burner, so you're going to feel hungry, and you'll need to keep your strength up. Go for energy drinks and snacks with plenty of carbohydrates. You want to have this ready at least a month in advance, so avoid perishable foods. That said, don't be tempted to tuck in to your birthing snacks in late pregnancy – you may be caught out by an early labour!

- Water or soft drinks

You may not receive much in the way of drinks, so take plenty of your own to be on the safe side. Labour will make you feel thirsty, and the wards tend to get very warm.

- Magazine or books

You may be in hospital in the early stages of labour and a magazine will keep you distracted. If breastfeeding isn't too difficult you may also like having a magazine for after the baby is born as it can take up to 40 minutes to feed a baby each time - the more relaxed you are the better feeding will go.

- iPod or music player

This can be a good distraction and calming tool during labour.

- TENS machine

This is by no means essential, but it's something you may want to consider. TENS machines deliver small electrical pulses to the body via electrodes placed on the skin. This is thought to help ease pain during labour. You can find more on TENS machines in the 'For Mum & Dad' category of our baby list.

- Birthing ball

Likewise, this is not an essential but something you may find helpful. It's a soft exercise ball to help with support and exercise in pregnancy and very supportive whilst in labour. Likewise you'll find more details of this in the 'For Mum & Dad' category.

- Arnica tablets

Arnica is a homoeopathic treatment with various uses. In the case of pregnancy and childbirth, it is often used during and after childbirth to help heal bruising. However, it has not been clinically proven to work.

- Maternity/Maxi pads

These are like very thick sanitary towels. Immediately after labour you will essentially experience a very heavy period, which could go on for a couple of weeks. You may find you can use standard sanitary towels later on, but to begin with you will need proper maternity pads. You should take at least 2 packs with you.

- Two or three outfits for the baby, including a cotton hat

These are the first outfits for your new baby - for use in the hospital and for its first pictures! There are 3 sizes for newborns - Tiny Baby (designed for babies born prematurely), Newborn and 0-3 months. Unless your baby is early, or you and your partner are particularly small, your baby should fit in to 0-3 months clothing immediately. If you do opt to buy Newborn outfits, buy very few as your baby is likely to grow out of them within weeks.

- Camera or camcorder and charger or batteries

You will definitely want a picture of your baby when it first enters the world, so make sure you have your camera at the ready.

- Mobile phone and charger

If there do happen to be any delays or complications with the birth, you'll want to keep in touch with relatives. You'll also want to get in touch with the exciting news once the baby's born!

- List of phone numbers or e-mail addresses

Ensure you have a list of contact numbers and email addresses for key relatives and friends - this is both to inform them of the new arrival, but also to notify them should problems occur. As one of our mums said "*My husband went home all excited about the new baby arriving, but didn't have my mum's phone number to call her up and tell her!*"

- Wash bag

After you've been through labour, you're going to feel sweaty and grubby. You'll want to have a shower, wash your hair and generally get cleaned up, so bring a well stocked wash bag.

- Hand and bath towel

If you're in a busy hospital you may not be provided with a towel, and if you do get one it's likely to be very small, so it's worth taking your own.

- Ear plugs

If you are put on a ward after delivery of your baby it's likely to be noisy and ear plugs will help you get some sleep when your partner is around to keep an eye on the baby. Rest is essential after giving birth and will help you breastfeed successfully too.

- Extra pillow or breastfeeding pillow

Pillows in hospital are often thin and you'll probably only get one, so for comfort it's worth taking your own - it also helps support you whilst breastfeeding.

- 1 pack of breast pads

If your milk comes in, your breasts will start to leak - especially when a baby is crying. Breast pads will absorb the milk and save you constantly changing your clothes and bras, and smelling of off milk! It may be a day or two before your milk comes in, but it's worth having these with you in case you stay in the hospital longer than you expected.

- Breastfeeding bra

Breastfeeding bras are specially designed to enable you to feed your baby without removing the whole bra.

Consult a bra fitting specialist before you give birth to find out what size breastfeeding bra you are likely to need. You will probably find your bra is loose to begin with, but once your milk comes in, your breasts will expand to fill it! Marks and Spencer, Mothercare and most department stores will offer a bra fitting service.

- Nipple cream

Before your milk arrives, your baby will be constantly suckling. It will also take the baby a while to learn to latch on properly once your milk has come in. The result of this is that it will make your nipples quite sore. Nipple cream will help protect and heal them. It's best to start using it as soon as the baby arrives, as this will help prevent problems developing.

- Bottles, formula and sterilising equipment

If you have decided not to breastfeed you will need to take these in to hospital with you. This is something you should also discuss with your midwife. You can find out more about bottles, formula and sterilising equipment in the Feeding section of our baby list.

- Nappies

The number of nappies you need will depend on how long you remain in the hospital. It's worth taking at least 12 to be on the safe side.

- Cotton wool pads or water wipes

You'll need these when changing your baby's nappy.

- Maternity outfit for going home

Despite having given birth, you won't shrink overnight! Ensure you have loose comfortable clothing to wear when you leave the hospital. This will be even more important if you end up having a C-section.

- Plastic bag

Some or all of your clothes are likely to be soiled during labour, so it's useful to have a plastic bag to take them home in.