

Packing for the Hospital: What Not to Forget

By Kim Fernandez

It's all so simple in the movies. Feeling the first labor pains, a calm mother-to-be rouses her husband. He grabs a carefully packed hospital bag—kept by the front door, of course—and ushers her into the car. A few hours later, their cherubic infant is sleeping peacefully in a bassinet and Mom looks gorgeous and happy with a ribbon in her hair and spotless coordinating robe.

Yeah, right.

At least one part of that scenario can happen. Keeping a list of items to bring to the hospital, if not packing them ahead of time, can make the onset of labor a lot calmer for everyone. And it takes just a few minutes to write out a list and even pack some of the bag ahead of time.

“Ideally, I recommend that my clients pack three separate bags,” says perinatal health educator and doula Melody Kisor, Alexandria, Va. For her own labor, she packed a bag for labor itself, a bag for herself after her son was born, and a bag with supplies for the baby.

Many women opt to pack two bags: one for labor, and one for their hospital room and going home again. The second bag stays in the car until mom is settled into her postpartum room, leaving the laboring woman and her partner with less to worry about in the heat of the moment.

LeAnne Marrs, a doula and mother of three in Marion, N.C., recommends that expectant mothers pack a few things from home. Photos, music, and a comfortable robe or big shirt can all help make labor easier, she says.

“The basic theme is to make you feel comfortable in your surroundings,” says Julie Chapman, Richmond, Va. She says that while she didn't use much in her bag during her 12-hour labor, little things that made her feel more at home were invaluable in helping her relax and concentrate on the job at hand.

“The biggest thing that helped us was having the bags packed early and having to grab a few last-minute things,” Chapman says. “My water broke and I only had time enough to grab a shower and dress before we had to rush to the hospital.”

The Basics

It's wise to pack “labor basics” ahead of time, even if you don't think you'll need them. Women who plan for medicated births can find themselves delivering without painkillers, and emergency C-sections do happen. Having along a focal point—a photo, favorite memento, or other item to concentrate on during contractions—can be a tremendous help.

Items for counter pressure and massage are also helpful. Common items for massage include tennis balls, wooden back massagers, and even rolling pins. Doula Nancy Draznin, mother to three in Gensee, Id., says a hollow plastic rolling pin filled with hot water provides the benefits of both pressure and moist heat.

Suzanne Spector, a mom in Herndon, Va., says the portable CD player she and her husband toted along really helped her through a long labor. “It was definitely nice to be able to listen to it,” she says with a laugh. “My husband, however, says he never

wishes to hear 'Suite for Flute and Jazz Piano' EVER again!"

Many hospitals and birthing centers offer laboring moms CD players, televisions, and VCRs. Asking about such amenities during the center tour can lighten the load for the trip to the labor room.

Most also will provide space in a refrigerator for frozen juice treats, water, or a bottle of champagne or sparkling cider. Check with your doctor to see if snacks will be allowed during labor and pack accordingly. Don't forget something for your labor partner to munch on.

"I was induced and didn't eat for 24 hours," says pregnant mom of two Michele Blakeslee. Her husband packed some of her favorite cookies in her labor bag, even though she couldn't eat during labor itself. "I was very happy to be eating cookies after my first son was born. It was after midnight, so there was no food available in the hospital."

She also packed her own pillow, and says the smell of home was a big comfort.

Other recommended items include:

- A swimsuit and change of clothes for the labor coach, in case the laboring mom wants to shower or use a birthing tub;
- A large plastic cup to hold ice chips;
- Books, playing cards, and other things to pass the time between contractions;

Hospital gowns are flimsy. While you may not want to pack your nicest gown for the day or two after delivery, a sturdy robe can make you much more comfortable, particularly as guests arrive.

Marrs recommends packing a small cloth with the mother's scent on it, in case mom and baby have to be separated.

- Toothbrush and toothpaste;
- Gum or mints for the labor coach, who is often very close to the laboring mother's nose during contractions;
- Oils or lotions for massage;
- A rice sock—an old tube sock filled with rice or buckwheat that can be heated in the microwave and applied to sore muscles.;
- Small bills and change for vending machines and payphones—many hospitals do not allow cell phone usage;
- A list of phone numbers for relatives and friends; and
- A camera. Kisor recommends packing a disposable camera in the labor bag before the big day, and says many moms forget their good cameras in the panic that often ensues with labor pains.

"Don't forget extra socks," says Jenny Bailey, a doula and mother of two in Mesa, Ariz. "If your water breaks, you'll have wet socks. When baby is born, you may have wet socks."

After the Birth

Packing to go home is relatively simple, as long as you remember that you won't be in those pre-pregnancy jeans quite yet! Most women fit into clothes the same way they did at 6 months' pregnant. But that doesn't mean you'll have to wear those same old maternity clothes home.

"I bought some cute black lounge pants, a new roomy tee, and some new tennis shoes," says mom of three Carrie Treloar, Forest Grove, Ore. "The new comfy clothes and shoes help me feel good and give my self-esteem a little boost." Your regular shampoo, cosmetics, and hair brushes from home will also help in that department.

Don't forget a going-home outfit for baby! The general rule of thumb is to dress baby for the weather as you'd dress yourself, plus one layer and a hat to preserve body heat.