

# Using a TENS machine in labour

**This leaflet is to support your use of a TENS machine during early or established labour.**

## What is it?

TENS stands for Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation. A TENS machine can be used as soon as your labour starts and works by assisting your body to produce its own natural pain relief called endorphins.

It is a small battery-powered machine which can fit in your hand, or comfortably be hung around your neck. The TENS produces a current which is sent through your body via sticky pads on your back and stimulates your nerves.

This works in two ways; firstly your body starts creating endorphins and secondly, it disrupts pain signals to the brain.

## How do I use it?

Your TENS machine pack should include:

- TENS machine, with batteries inside it
- Pack of sticky gel pads in unopened pack
- Spare batteries
- This instruction leaflet

The two gel pads are attached at the level of your bra strap, either side of your spine and connected into the TENS machine. The next two are placed at the top of your knickers line, either side of your spine and also connected into the machine. You can re-use the gels pads on yourself, meaning you can take it on and off as required in labour.

Effective use of the TENS machine is dependent on good placement of the pads, see picture:

From the start of your tightenings / contractions, the TENS provides a constant, low-level current which can be increased at your own pace. As soon your contractions regulate and become more intense a “boost” button can be used which stimulates your nerves to block pain signals each time you experience a contraction.

A TENS machine is safe to use for you and your baby when positioned correctly and used when labour starts. It is **not** recommended if you have a pacemaker or heart rhythm disorder; speak to your GP or consultant for medical advice if you are concerned. Do not use on broken skin.



TENS cannot be used in water, it needs to be removed if you have a bath, shower or get into a birthing pool; but is easy to remove and replace later on.

## Why should I use it?

Benefits include reduced back ache and back pain; the machine is portable and easy to use, which can help you to stay mobile, especially when in early labour.

There is currently insufficient evidence to strongly recommend the use of TENS in labour; NICE guidance (2014) suggests limiting the use of TENS for early labour only.

Further reviews and educational opinions suggest a positive relationship between TENS use, control during labour and birth, the birthing environment and positive birthing experiences.

Women have suggested a TENS machine enables them to actively take part in their pain relief and supports their independence and choice.

## What does it feel like?

The pads are quite cold and sticky when first applied, but warm up quickly. Once started the current feels “buzzy” or “fizzy” on your back, a bit like an electric toothbrush against your skin. You set the level and intensity, it shouldn't hurt – as your labour builds you can control the TENS machine to work for you.

## References

- National Institution for Health and Care Excellence (2014) Intrapartum Care for healthy women and babies. London: NICE
- Birthzang's Guide to Using a TENS Machine in Labour (2016) <http://www.birthzang.co.uk>
- Doctorate in Clinical Practice (2011) Women's experiences of Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS) for pain control in labour. University of Southampton: Lucinda Shawley

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**Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.**

J Battle, Midwife, September 2019

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