



# What's a Doula?

& OTHER FAQs  
FOR CURIOUS, CONSCIOUS FAMILIES

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## What is a birth doula?

A doula (pronounced *doo-la*) is a trained birth professional who provides non-medical support to women and their partners before, during and after labour and childbirth.

She (usually she, though not always!) attends you from as early in your labour as you'd like and stays with you throughout labour and birth until you are settled with your newborn in your arms. This is called 'continuous care' or 'continuity of care' and has been found to be a vital ingredient in happy, healthy labours, births and babies.

The word doula is Greek, meaning 'woman who serves', and the role is as ancient as birth itself. 'Mothering the mother' is part of our innate birthing wisdom. A doula is 'with woman' to witness, nurture and comfort her as she brings new life into the world.

Many modern doulas will also walk with you from early pregnancy and throughout your entire postpartum, providing friendship, mentoring, celebration, support & nourishment for your entire rite of passage to motherhood. These doulas are the village you've been craving!

A doula knows birth to be a normal and natural event that has a deep and lasting impact on women's lives. She is an advocate of the woman's own choices and experience. Your doula will never make decisions for you but empowers and supports the labour and birth options you choose for yourself.

# What does a doula do?

Every mother, pregnancy, family, labour and birth is different, and your doula will mix, match and personalise her care to meet your needs.

In general, she will:

- **Be there.** Presence is a doula super power—she will bring a vibe that is calm, positive and safe. Birth is spiritual and doulas set up and hold your sacred space, encourage you, believe in you, and help you to birth your own way.
- **Educate and inform.** Doulas are birth nerds that love to share information, evidence, products, practises, rituals and more and with mamas and papas to-be. If you are concerned or curious about anything, just ask—your doula has a library of resources to draw on to for your information and to support your decision-making. During labour she will advocate for your birth wishes and make sure you and your partner get what you need to make informed decisions.
- **Share tricks of the trade.** Hydrotherapy, ice packs, acupressure, labour positions, rebozos, mood changers, and more...your doula knows what works in labour and birth and can help you change it up as labour progresses.
- **Support your partner.** Your doula honours and nurtures your bond with your partner and supports them to support you with information, guidance, reassurance, relaxation, refreshment and anything else they need. Many partners love to pick the brain of a doula to help them totally rock the birth partner role!
- **Offer an extra pair of hands.** From filling the birth pool to massage to feeding & hydrating you, your doula can do all the things your partner can't do because you need them at your side. Or your doula can be at your side while your partner makes him or herself useful...or takes a much-needed break.
- **Stay calm.** While a doula cannot guarantee how your birth will turn out, her wisdom and emotional support is invaluable should something unexpected happen. Birth is never 100% safe, but a doula can support your emergency decision-making and help lessen birth trauma for both mothers and partners.

Sometimes a doula will sit quietly in the corner as you labour well without her—it may look like she is doing 'nothing' but she is intensely present, engaged, holding your energetic space, and ready for anything.

Sometimes a doula is right down in the labour trenches with you, breathing with you through every breath, propping up your weary body with her own, and shining a light for your flagging spirit.

Some doulas are comfort-measure specialists with added skills like massage, some offer the magic of herbal teas and crystals, and some especially love to look after your other kids, fill out your hospital paperwork, and bring you Burger King.

Choose a doula who makes you feel great about yourself and your birth, and she will know just what to do for you when the time comes.

# I've got a midwife - do I need a doula?

No one knows what you need for your birth except you—though most women who have had a doula alongside (or instead of) their midwife highly value the additional support, as currently midwives and doulas have very different roles.

Your midwife is your **healthcare provider**. Here in New Zealand we have a midwife-led maternity system based on continuity of care. Every pregnant woman chooses a Lead Maternity Carer (LMC)\*; this can be a doctor (family GP or private obstetrician) or a midwife (community or hospital based). The doctor or midwife you choose becomes your LMC and looks after the health and wellbeing of you and your baby during pregnancy, birth and the postnatal period. Midwives can offer and administer options for medical care if required (monitoring, exams, medications etc.).

Your doula is your **physical, emotional, and spiritual support**. A doula has no other priority than to care for you, comfort you and encourage you for the entire duration of your labour and birth. Doulas offer and carry out options for non-medical care (education, comfort measures, encouragement, advocacy, errands, information etc.)



It's true that many midwives sometimes perform duties that cross over into doula territory. On one hand this is exactly as it should be. Birth is an organic event that is best approached fluidly and empathically. Kindness, comfort, emotional support & space holding are everybody's job at a birth.

But...midwives already have a full-time job at a birth. This means every midwife must balance her (legal and professional) duty as your primary healthcare provider with the other support measures she knows you need or would benefit from. Every midwife walks this line the best she can given her own philosophy, experiences and the professional priorities arising from the circumstances of each unique birth.

This is a long way to say that while midwives deeply recognise the need for women to have an unconditionally safe, trusting and supportive person to care for, comfort and advocate for them during labour and birth, midwives themselves are not always in a position to be that person for you, nor is that their (professional) job description.

Birth can be long, intense and unpredictable. In some places it is common to have many birth attendants, some acting as midwives, some as doulas, and

sometimes sharing both roles. Together midwives and doulas can serve labouring women to support optimal labour and birth.

It's also worth noting that most midwives will not be able to attend your birth until you are in clearly established active labour, while a doula can be with you at home right from early or pre-labour if needed and stay until you are settled after the birth.

*\*A note about the term Lead Maternity Carer (LMC). In my opinion your Lead Maternity Carer is (and can only be) YOU. This language is part of a birth culture that decentralises women and centres medical professionals as the authority on pregnancy & birth. It's worth considering your relationship to this dynamic as you choose your birth care team.*

# Midwives, doulas & birthkeepers, oh my!

Just a quick-ish note on all the names, roles & crazy dynamics out there in the birth-o-sphere!

In New Zealand, if someone is a midwife that means they are registered by the Midwifery Council (a healthcare/medical service), paid by the government, and therefore legally & professionally contracted to follow certain guidelines, authorities & policies. Sometimes, those professional & legal guidelines are in conflict with what a woman wants for herself and her family and a midwife either does not feel able to continue support her, or will pressure her to adhere to guidelines she doesn't align with so that she *can* still support her.

*(Yep, it's a big old mess out there, but everyone is truly doing their best in a system that was never built to serve birth or women).*

A registered midwife who follows medical guidelines that make you feel safe might be just what you are looking for. Great! But there are a fast-growing number of families who are looking for something completely different. They are looking for unregistered, non-medical birthworkers—birth support that will radically uphold their own authority & decision making and who have no split loyalties or government-mandated responsibilities. These birthworkers are often called birthkeepers, though they go by many other names too (Radical Birthkeeper or RBK, birth witness, birth companion, and of course, doula.)

Doulas, being already unregistered and non-medical—but who are widely known for having a role in medical birth—fall somewhere in a grey area. Some doulas really believe allopathic medicine (and the government) has a place in birth, support registered midwives and hospital births, and wouldn't feel comfortable supporting a birth without a midwife present. Some doulas believe birth is not medical at all (either rarely, or ever), discuss a plan for emergencies, and will only support freebirth/birth where no medical providers are present. And many/most will support any kind of birth, as they believe in and are capable of supporting all women uniquely, whatever she may want & need.

In our culture we have been taught that registered, certified professionals are 'safe' and that unregistered, uncertified professionals are a danger to us. We have been taught that Western medicine is an appropriate tool to meet birth with, and we are scared of meeting it the way it was designed, intended & works best. It's worth noting that the majority of women in this country report their birth as traumatic (about two thirds) —and almost all of them had registered healthcare providers.

No matter who you engage to support your birth, you will need to do your own work to decide if they are 'qualified' in what you are looking for, or not. No piece of paper or registering body can tell you that, and you won't employ somebody who could be a danger to you unless you try to outsource your innate authority & responsibility. Only you and your family will have to live with the outcome of your birth forever. No one else could possibly be as invested, responsible or qualified to make decisions on your behalf.

Ask any potential birthworker (medical or not, qualified or not) what their *own* boundaries around supporting your birth (and birth in general) are. Ask them what will happen if their boundaries conflict with your needs or desires. Talk about all the 'what if' scenarios you are worried about. All support providers are people and they bring a human element to your birth that is, on it's own, an intervention. Make sure it's someone you feel great about, who brings everything you want!

## Can my partner be my doula?

Your baby's other parent is your baby's other parent, not a doula. While they will not be physically birthing your baby, your birth is also one of the most momentous occasions of *their* life. He or she will naturally have overwhelming feelings and needs of their own during the process that may or may not affect the level of doula-type support they can offer. Many couples birth together beautifully without outside support! Others invite a doula to support the whole birthing family so each person can bring their best to meeting their new baby.

Very practically, it can be difficult for your partner to take breaks, eat etc. if they are your one-and-only support person. It can also bring your partner peace of mind to have someone present who knows labour and birth and can help them navigate new or challenging situations.

A doula does not replace your partner or chosen birth partner, but supports your partner to better support you in meeting your baby together.

## Can my friend/relative be my doula?



In theory, YES! In an ideal world we all would have the skills of a doula, and every birthing person could choose their birth support team from those nearest and dearest in their lives.

If you have a friend or relative who you would love at your birth, ask yourself (and perhaps them) if they could offer the kind of support you are looking for. Share with them what a doula is and does. You are looking for someone who can care for you unconditionally whatever labour brings and be calm, non-judgemental, and comfortable in intense and intimate situations. It helps if they have the kind of

life where it is easy for them to be on call (worrying whether or not your emotional support person can make it to your birth is incredibly counter-productive).

Your Mum, Dad, sister, auntie, nana, friend and other people who make you feel safe, loved and supported are awesome to have at your birth. Some of these people may serve you well in the doula role—you know who those people are. The others will (and should!) show up as your Mum, Dad, sister, auntie, nana or friend. Because they love you, they may not always be impartial. They may not always be calm. They may have their own ideas about your decisions.

Keep in mind that along with emotional support, a professional doula also brings a deep practical knowledge of birth, labouring women and the maternity system, as well as the skills to navigate and advocate for you should your birth plan veer off track. This can make them incredibly valuable to both you and the rest of your birth team.



# Is a doula just for hippies who homebirth?

No way, man! While women who prefer to birth physiologically (traditionally called "natural" birth) are more likely to already understand the role of a doula in supporting healthy birth, every labouring woman can benefit from a doula—those birthing in a hospital setting perhaps most of all.

When you choose to birth in a hospital you are birthing in a medical environment that is extremely risk-averse and policy-driven. Hospital professionals are used to dealing with worst-case scenarios and their systems and processes are built to cope with this and the running of a large government-funded institution. While everybody does the best they can to meet women's needs under these circumstances, women who birth in hospital, whether or not their birth was complicated, often feel they and their partners are not as well supported as they could be.

In hospital, a doula can: help turn your delivery suite into a comforting birth nest, run errands for you and your partner, stay overnight with you in the women's ward if your partner is not allowed, help you advocate for your birth plan if it goes against hospital policy, offer broader information when making difficult decisions, and provide a constant and familiar source of comfort and care when hospital care providers must change shift.

More than that, your doula is not part of the hospital or maternity system, and stays human, empathic and connected to you and your partner no matter what is happening around or to you.

Even women who have emergency or planned caesareans can turn a major (and often unwelcome) surgical procedure into a well-supported and more fulfilling birth experience with the help, advocacy & space holding of a doula.

A note on "natural" birth: what is usually meant by "natural" is whether a birth is physiological (allowing your body's organic processes to manage labour and birth) or medically assisted (using drugs, technology and other interventions to manage labour and birth).

What is right for you is whatever makes you personally feel safe and surrounded by the people and processes you trust. If you're not sure what your options are, reading up on evidence-based birth can help you discover the best decisions for your family.

Start at [evidencebasedbirth.com](http://evidencebasedbirth.com) and [sarahbuckley.com](http://sarahbuckley.com) or by listening to the epic podcast [The Midwives Cauldron](#).

Consulting your intuition & listening to the experiences of other women can also help you discover what is right for you. Invalidating these things as meaningless or 'anecdotal evidence' is a way to discount and disparage women's embodied decision-making processes. Intuition is a type of knowledge and authority. The wisdom of other women can be incredibly supportive, and more contextual to our lives than stark research studies.





## What qualifications does a doula have?

Doulas do not have to be certified or licensed to practise professionally, but most do undergo training and/or certification before taking on paying families.

DONA International is the world's first, largest and leading doula organisation, credited with turning doula into an accredited profession, though there are many other well-respected doula programmes including CAPPA Worldwide, Australian Doula College, Birthing from Within, and Birth Works Inc.

There are also doulas that forgo formal certification in favour of a more spiritual and traditionally-based approach, and organisations that offer a more holistic curriculum to birth workers such as Indie Birth and The Matrona.

Training usually involves workshops and up to two years of home study, required reading, assignments and documented attendance at several births.

These organisations promote high-quality birth and postpartum support and set ethical and evidence-based standards of practise for doulas worldwide.

## What is the evidence for doula-assisted birth?

Compared to national averages, the research indicates families who have doulas have:

- Shorter labours
- Fewer medical interventions
- Lower caesarean rates
- Healthier babies
- Happier mothers
- More positive birth experiences

There are no documented negative outcomes associated with doula-assisted labour and birth.

LEARN MORE:

**Evidence Based Birth: *The Evidence for Doulas***

<https://evidencebasedbirth.com/the-evidence-for-doulas/>

**The Journal of Perinatal Education: *Continuous Labour Support***

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1595190/>

**Ausmed: *The Midwife and the Doula: the Case for Continuous Care in Labour***

<https://www.ausmed.com/articles/midwife-and-doula/>

**The Journal of Perinatal Education: *Women's Perceptions of Their Doula Support***

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1804309/>

### Let's Connect!

Have you got even more questions? I've got even more answers!  
Please reach out, I'd love to hear from you and be a resource for you.



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