

I have mentioned before that one thing that never fails to get midwives' attention is the telling of a birth story, which can silence a room in 5 seconds, but there is another relatively failsafe way: the unpacking of someone else's birth kit. When midwife teachers do this for their students (which, given the parking situation at most universities, is no mean feat!), it is not the delivery pack that really gets their attention, but the things that come out of the side pockets - the oddities that have no equivalent in the labour ward cupboard.

Of course, even experienced midwives like looking in each others' bags, so, with the help of some colleagues and friends, I now have a list of twenty 'birthkit essentials' to share. They are not just for home births, either; many can be translated into other environments as well.

The first few are things for women's comfort, to help keep birth normal, or to create the right environment for normal birth:

I really like my heating packs - re-usable heat packs that 'snap' to go hot, and provide heat for 30-45 minutes. Great for putting on sacrum or abdomen, they sit comfortably in knickers and stop you having to mess around with hot water bottles or dripping flannels. Women love them. They need to be boiled in a saucepan for 10 minutes to make them reusable again. Also good for bus / van / tent births where running hot water is not easily available!

Some of those "vitamin and mineral complex" packs which you dissolve in water - they are great if a woman flags during the second / third stage.

A CD of animals in the jungle!

Yumzy massage oil for lower back massage ~ it can be fancy aromatherapy or something simple without aroma.

Bendy straws so women can keep drinking in any position.

A black sheet - to put over the window if it is daylight and the curtains aren't effective.

I made a folder of cartoons and jokes, and then I can read some out to women or their birth partners if laughter is needed!

My little black book! When I hear about a useful tip, I write it in there.

A small paper fan - great for cooling women down, and a useful distraction for the partner if he needs a 'job'.

Then there are the things for the midwife's comfort:

Eyebright wake-up eye cream for me! - great at 4am when I'm flagging!

The telephone numbers of my mentor midwife / midwife friends, in case I need to talk things through with someone in the middle of the night.

Essentials and treats for me: deodorant, clean knickers, toothbrush, tea bags and chocolate!

A bag of food; things like nuts and dates that don't need refrigeration - I don't want to be reliant on how recently someone else has been shopping if I need sustenance.

Something for the midwife to occupy herself while she watches and waits. I took my knitting to my friend's home birth and now when I wear the finished cardigan I think of the bit above my left breast as being 'Anna's birth!'

And then the practical:

An old toothbrush - great for getting blood off instruments quickly.

A card with written instructions on who and how to call for help in an emergency and a reminder to put on outside lights / open the door - if I am suddenly faced with a crisis I can hand it to the woman's partner or friend and be able to get on with what I need to do.

A torch - it can be dim lighting, peeking to see the impending arrival, great to shine on a mirror in the birth pool and get the adrenaline flow going at "first sight". Brilliant for photos (especially if shone onto the mirror on the floor when the woman is upright).

A tiny notebook and if I'm at a birth and think of something I want to remember, I write it in ... before I had that I would have great ideas at a birth, but then after I had slept and caught up afterwards, I'd forget!

Big, thick bin liners: they can turn into makeshift inco pads with towels on top, used to line the toilet if women are pushing on it in third stage, and, when I am pushed for time and have another birth, I just throw everything I've used into one and dump it in the car to sort out later!

A washable plastic tablecloth with fabric backing - much less 'slippy' than plastic sheets!

However, lest I mistakenly give the impression that these are all truly essential for everyone, I would like to finish by mentioning the midwives who said they could think of no material thing that was indispensable. One midwife said she could find everything she really needed in the average house ... now there's an interesting challenge!

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