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## Mother's little helpers

### Doulas making life easier for pre- and postpartum women

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There's a secret being passed from new moms to pregnant women all over the Bay Area. And like any good secret, women are quick to pass it on.

The word they're spreading is "doula" -- a Greek term that translates to "handmaiden" or "servant." Or "heaven," as Piedmont mom Jamie Traeger-Muney put it, after having a postpartum doula help out with her 8-week-old Hanna.

Doulas come in two varieties -- labor and postpartum -- but with the same premise: A doula is a physical and emotional coach for mom during one of life's most intense experiences. Labor doulas coach at the actual birth; postpartum doulas play mother to the new mom once the baby comes home, helping with cooking, lactation advice and rocking the baby, without the emotional baggage of advice offered by one's own mom or mother-in-law.

Becoming a new mom is scary, uncharted territory, so it's not surprising that an offer of help has women jumping on the doula bandwagon.

"What could be better than somebody who comes over and tells you to go upstairs and take a nap?" says Traeger-Muney, 35, who had never heard the word doula until a mom friend clued her in right after her daughter was born. "I'm a complete convert."

While the practice began in ancient times -- think of a Greek mosaic depicting a laboring woman surrounded by a cadre of females -- doulas have become a modern mom phenom. A poll on BabyCenter.com finds that 49 percent of respondents plan on using a doula. In San Francisco, Kaiser and San Francisco General hospitals are starting in-house doula programs to address growing interest. And the number of births assisted by doulas registered with Doulas of North America, the primary certification organization, has doubled in the last three years.

"Obviously, there is something women need that they are not getting from strict medical care," says Megan Steelman, supervisor of Newborn Connections at California Pacific Medical Center.

#### The labor doula

The practice of labor doulas in this country arrived with the natural birth movement.

Philosophically aligned with midwives, but without the medical training, a doula's mission was to ward off the evils of modern medicine in childbirth. Typically, mothers who signed them up wore no animal products and dreamed of birthing their babies naturally, submerged in water. But this overtly hippie picture is a thing of the past.

"It really is becoming more mainstream because the client base is mainstream," says Nancy Herd, director of Day One, a Presidio Heights pre- and postnatal services center that opened last December. "It was a natural field, all about standing up to the medical establishment. That's certainly not what it is today."

Most women hiring doulas today are professionals, starting their families later, with just enough knowledge about birth and newborns to feel nervous.

Although many are looking to a doula in hopes of minimizing medical interventions at the birth, a drug-free delivery is rarely an explicit goal. The driving force behind hiring a doula is having a positive, comfortable, personal birth experience.

Labor doulas start working with the couple a few weeks prior to the birth to create a birth plan: what type of music to play during contractions; hard or soft foot massage; painkillers at what point? By getting to know the couple,

the doula learns what matters most.

For Rebekah Bailey, 35, of Berkeley, what mattered most was avoiding the hospital as long as possible.

"I don't like procedures. I don't like hospitals. I wanted to be there as short a time as possible," Bailey says. And the doula delivered. "Without her, I'm sure we would have gone in at 7 p.m. But we made it at home until midnight.

I trusted the doula to know when we absolutely had to go in."

Kate Depman, a San Francisco mother of twins, was looking for someone to take charge -- not only of the birth itself, but of all the family in the room.

"I needed someone to orchestrate my family in the hospital -- my sister, brother, cousins. Someone had to be in charge because I knew I couldn't," Depman says.

Contrary to the common concern that doulas usurp the partner's role at the birth, many, like Brian Ferrel, are finding the opposite.

"Having a doula, I actually did more," says Ferrel, who wondered aloud to his wife Laurie before the birth what his role would be with the doula there. "She showed me in the midst of the most

intense contractions how to help Laurie through. From that point on, it was me doing it -- not the doula."

### **The postpartum doula**

Like Depman, many women need assistance for their partners as well as for themselves. They're spending \$500-\$1,000 to hire a doula for three or four visits -- before, during and after the birth -- not just for themselves, but to buy peace of mind for their partner. Women recognize their husbands or partners have big shoes to fill -- birth coach, family liaison, emotional rock -- and that there's little preparation for the part.

"I was after support for (husband) Hans, so there would be less pressure on him," says Marian Baldauf, 39, who works for a San Francisco investment management firm. Doula Cherie Trombley helped during the lengthy labor of son Fritz, the Baldaufs' first baby, last month at California Pacific Medical Center. Fritz was delivered by C-section and spent time in the intensive care unit before going home with his mom a few days later.

Now the Baldaufs have a postpartum doula, Vivian Sonnenberg, who spends a few hours on weekdays with the new mother and child.

When Sonnenberg arrives, she asks Baldauf how Fritz slept -- or didn't -- the previous night, and takes care of the baby so Baldauf can shower and get dressed.

### **Doctors' concerns**

While laboring moms and their partners can't say enough about what a doula brings to the birth room, nurses and obstetricians aren't singing the same praises. Though heartened by studies that cite a reduced rate of C-sections and shorter labor times with a doula, they worry that doulas put principle over practicality. And some bring antagonism into the room.

"There are doulas out there who think any intervention is interrupting nature's work," says Dr. Laurie Green, who delivers more than 300 babies a year at California Pacific Medical Center. "That can cause problems."

But Green would happily get on a soapbox to promote postpartum doulas.

"(It's) woeful how we treat women postpartum. There's a bar set for life postpartum that is above what mere mortals can aspire to. Moms in the wild aren't doing what we're asking women to do," Green says.

Traeger-Muney couldn't agree more. Recalling her postpartum doula, the mother of two says: "I cried when she left."

## Where to find them

Here is a list of resources that provide referrals and listings of labor and postpartum doulas.

-- San Francisco

### Day One

(415) 440-3291

3490 California St., Suite 203

[www.dayonecenter.com](http://www.dayonecenter.com)

### Natural Resources

(415) 550-2611

1307 Castro St.

[www.naturalresourcesonline.com](http://www.naturalresourcesonline.com)

-- South Bay

### Blossom Birth Services

(650) 328-2509

1452 El Camino Real, Menlo Park

[www.blossombirth.com](http://www.blossombirth.com)

-- East Bay

### BirthWays

(510) 869-2797

1677 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley

[www.birthways.org](http://www.birthways.org)

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## What to look for

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Here are some tips from Bay Area mothers who used doulas on what to keep in mind when hiring one for the birth or postpartum. If hiring a labor doula, consider:

-- Chemistry: Make sure you like this person and that you feel comfortable with her.

Imagine what it would be like to spend 24 hours naked in a room with her -- because you probably will.

-- Philosophy: Understand the doula's philosophy regarding the birth experience, medical interventions, the use of painkillers, etc. A good doula should help you achieve your ideal experience, not hers.

-- Flexibility: Every labor unfolds in an unpredictable way; anticipate the unexpected. Do you feel confident that the doula can work "off plan" and adjust to changing circumstances?

-- Experience: While experience matters, it's less important than many other qualities. Even if the doula has assisted at just five births, that's probably a lot more experience than you have under your belt.

The most important thing is that you feel confident with the doula's abilities.

-- Fee: Bay Area doulas charge from \$500-\$1,000 for their services. This includes one or two prebirth consultations, assistance at the birth and one postbirth visit. Some doulas will work on a sliding scale, so inquire.

-- If hiring a postpartum doula, consider:

-- Services: Postpartum doulas do a broad range of tasks for mother, family and baby. Find out what the doula is willing to do, and make sure it's what you really need.

-- Availability: Early weeks with a newborn are unpredictable.

Find a doula with plenty of availability, so she can be there when you really need the help.

-- Cost: Postpartum doulas in the Bay Area charge \$25-\$35 per hour.

Be aware that the fee for evening/night hours can be higher than for day hours.

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