

Birth Plan Tips

Your birth preferences (also called a birth plan) must be read to be effective. To increase your chances of having the care you want from the hospital staff:

- ▶ Keep it brief - Focus only on what matters most. Choose your battles. Remember, you can always refuse an intervention when it's offered – just ask for a waiver.
- ▶ Make it easy to read - Use a large, clear font. Only use handwriting if it's truly legible. Bullet points work better than paragraphs, and leaving white space helps staff scan it quickly. Printing on colored paper will also help it stand out from the stack of white hospital forms.
- ▶ Personalize it - Attach a photo of you and your partner (and pets or your other children) to the birth plan. This helps the staff connect the preferences with a real family – not just a piece of paper. If this isn't your first baby, include a brief note about previous experiences to help understand your goals for this birth. For example: "My first birth was medically managed, so it's important to me to avoid interventions for this birth."
- ▶ Make it relevant - Only include things that apply to the hospital setting. For example, if the hospital doesn't routinely give enemas, there's no need to say they don't want one. And while having sex to stimulate labor might be on your personal list of things to try, it doesn't belong on a document for the nursing staff.
- ▶ Say it with food - Nurses work long shifts and truly appreciate snacks. Bring a small basket or gift bag with reasonably healthy items (organic cookies, fruit, crackers, cheese, nuts that are sealed and clearly labeled) can go a long way. While chocolate is always a hit, include some nourishing options, too. This small gesture increases the likelihood that every nurse at the station will read your birth preferences. Suggest bringing a second basket for the postpartum nurses as well.
- ▶ Solicit their help - Most doctors and nurses chose their professions because they genuinely want to help. The issue is that their idea of what's helpful often comes from a medical model, where tools like epidurals, IVs, episiotomies, and internal monitors are considered standard care. If your client expresses that they are hoping to avoid interventions and asks for the staff's help in doing so, it reframes the conversation. It invites the nurse into a supportive role rather than setting up a confrontation. This small shift in language can make a big difference.
- ▶ Keep it positive - Frame your preferences using affirming language. Instead of writing what you don't want, say what you do want. For instance, "It's important to me to have the freedom to walk and change positions for progress and pain relief during my labor, therefore I would like to use mobile monitoring if available, or intermittent monitoring otherwise" will generally be better received than "I don't want continuous fetal monitoring." Positive language and a focus on the desired outcome invites staff to help.
- ▶ Keep it simple - Use clear, respectful language that emphasizes collaboration. Statements like "I am hoping to work with a nurse who believes in natural childbirth" or "I expect to actively participate in all decisions to ensure my ability to provide informed consent" are both friendly and effective. Simplicity helps ensure that your intentions are understood quickly and taken seriously.