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## Folklore or Fact?

### Doctors, Midwives and Moms Weigh in on Do-it-Yourself Labor Induction

By Katherine Bontrager

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You've looked forward to it for nine months. You've prepared, studied, decorated and above all, waited. You're enjoying this special time, but ready for the day when the little one inside makes his or her big entrance.

Then your due date comes and goes. For centuries, women have wanted to jump-start labor, and in turn doctors, midwives and others have given advice about just what will start those contractions. But is there any truth to the claims of castor oil, exercise or spicy foods? And more importantly – are they safe?

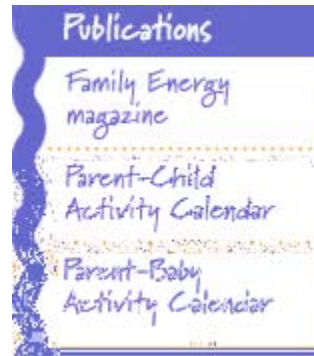
#### What the Doctors Say

Dr. Jonathan Schaffir, a clinical assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Ohio State University, conducted a study on labor-inducing folklore. Dr. Schaffir surveyed more than 100 pregnant women at the Ohio State prenatal clinic about their knowledge of 10 common myths of expediting labor: walking, sex, heavy exercise, using a laxative such as castor oil, nipple stimulation, eating spicy foods, fright, starvation, having an enema and drinking herbal tea.

The study, published in the March 2002 edition of the journal *Birth*, found that two out of three pregnant women believed that walking would help induce labor, while nearly half believed that having sex would. Regardless of race, age or level of education, three-quarters of the women said they had garnered advice from friends and relatives, while another 12 percent named physicians or nurses as the information provider.

Dr. Schaffir admittedly does not put much confidence in such suggestions, though he says that recommendations of having sex or taking castor oil might have some biological basis. Still, he maintains that dosages and other safety issues have not been established to the point where folk remedies can safely be recommended. Many times, wives' tales have little scientific merit, and some are at odds with





what is known to be beneficial for the fetus.

Dr. Randy Morris is a reproductive endocrinologist specializing in infertility and reproductive medicine in Chicago, Ill. He has not only heard of such wives' tales, but has also used a few when expecting his three children. Board certified in both reproductive infertility and obstetrics and gynecology, Dr. Morris serves as an associate clinical professor for the division of reproductive endocrinology at the University of Illinois School of Medicine in Chicago. He says that the ability to induce labor is made easier by several factors including previous pregnancies, whether the cervix is already dilated and if contractions have already begun. There are a few common myths that may work, at least some of the time, he says.

#### Getting Hot and Heavy

The old standby of intercourse has, to a small degree, some scientific merit, says Dr. Morris. "If the cervix is disturbed sufficiently, it may release a chemical called prostaglandins which could stimulate contractions," says Dr. Morris. "It's probably not very effective, but it is certainly the most fun to try. It's doubtful there is any risk involved, so there is no reason not to try."

"A very common folklore concerns sexual intercourse," says Dr. Schaffir. "There is some evidence for it on a couple of levels: First of all, there are components of semen called prostaglandins which are natural hormones – the same we synthesize to induce labor. The high levels found in semen naturally may have some effect. And also the mother's orgasm may cause uterine contractions."

"I don't recommend having sex just to induce labor," says Dr. Schaffir. "There is not quite a body of evidence to show that it is effective and safe, but certainly it is biologically plausible and enough people out there are talking about it."

Nipple stimulation, according to Dr. Morris, definitely works but may require a lot of stimulation over a period of time. "There is a physiological basis for why it works," he says. "When we have a patient come in the hospital, we can administer Pitocin, the synthetic form of oxytocin, a pituitary hormone that stimulates contractions of the uterus." Oxytocin occurs naturally in the body and is released during nipple stimulation. Still, the sheer amount of stimulation required makes it unlikely this will work all the time.



#### Food Facts

Dr. Schaffir says he's heard tales of Chinese food and spicy foods, but he's not aware of any scientific facts that back up such claims. One oral induction method, however, does have some science behind the myth – a couple of studies of castor oil versus placebo found that the castor oil was effective in inducing labor. "We're not exactly sure why," says Dr. Schaffir. "It's

a laxative and increases intestinal peristalsis, which is why some people may think spicy foods or other ingredients that irritate the gut may start labor."

Still, it is unknown what kind of dose is appropriate, and there is some concern that causing intestinal peristalsis may force babies to pass stool in the uterus. "There are enough questions so that I don't recommend such things routinely," says Dr. Schaffir. "If it comes out of my mouth, it has to be something safe and effective."

Dr. Morris also agrees that "classic" labor-inducing foods, such as eggplant and balsamic dressing, don't really work. "We tried this one ourselves at a 'famous' labor-inducing restaurant in Los Angeles," he says. "It doesn't work."

### The Exercise Effect

Exercise is another way to speed things up, but not for the reasons you may think. "When a woman becomes dehydrated, her pituitary gland releases hormones to conserve water," Dr. Morris says. "The hormones are very similar to the hormone that causes contractions. Oxytocin is similar in structure to vasopressin, which is involved in the regulation of body fluids. If you get dehydrated, your body produces more of this to keep from becoming more dehydrated."

There are certain things that are recommended for pregnant women who want to exercise, including keeping the heart rate below 125 beats per minute. It is not recommended that women who have not otherwise been working out suddenly start doing so at the end of pregnancy.

### What Moms Say

Carol Stevenson was pregnant with her second child when she went to the doctor nine days before her due date. The Stevenson Ranch, Calif., mother was dilated 1 centimeter, and her doctor told her that the baby could be born that night or could stay in another week. "When my OB told me that I was slightly dilated and a little effaced, I was excited about the prospect of putting an end to my largeness," Stevenson says.

She says her doctor suggested trying to walk or have sex to put things into motion. "Since my husband was sitting right there, I think they exchanged a wink-wink and high five," she says. "I told my doctor that we had had sex a few days prior, but it didn't bring on labor. He said that maybe that 'act' is what got the dilation started. These were encouraging words."

Having battled sciatica for a few weeks, walking was a chore. But Stevenson began to pound the pavement right after leaving the doctor's office with more vigor than she had managed for weeks. "The prospect of starting labor got me walking despite the pain. After touring the mall to near exhaustion, I drug my husband home and cornered him," Stevenson says with humor. "It was awkward, but I was oh-so-ready to have that baby."

Real contractions began the next morning. Elation gave way to a little bit of panic, however, when Stevenson progressed so quickly that the baby had to be delivered by fire department officials on her bed just an hour after labor had begun. "Maybe the walking and love making were a bit too much in combination!" Stevenson says. With her third newborn delivered this May, she took things a little easier when it came to jump-starting labor.

Like most mothers-to-be, Stephanie Johnston of Kansas City, Mo., has had plenty of advice on what to do when her first child is due in October. But among the oddest advice she has heard came from her best friend, a new mother.

"When she was 38 weeks pregnant, a doctor that my friend works with told her that his wife drank papaya juice to induce labor at the recommendation of her OB," Johnston says. "The next day during dinner my friend had a fruit drink that included papaya juice, and about 12 hours later her daughter was born." The recommendation worked for another very pregnant friend, Johnston says, who tried the papaya juice trick and a few hours later went into labor with her son. "Should my highly anticipated due date come and go, I too will be reaching for papaya juice," Johnston says.



As in all things, it is essential that mothers be cautious in whatever they do while

pregnant. What works for one mom-to-be, may not work for another. Every body is different, so before trying anything, even as simple as walking or having intercourse, it is best to first contact your doctor. The little one inside is too precious to risk in any attempt to rush the birth date.

It is a point that Dr. Schaffir recommends even to his most eager patients. “My point of view is to let nature take its course because usually labor that starts spontaneously is the best kind of uncomplicated labor,” says Dr. Schaffir. “I understand women become impatient and uncomfortable, but I’ve been more prone to offer them moral support than something to start contractions.”

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