MIDWIVES AND DOULAS
What’s the Difference?

A very common question pregnant women have when choosing a health care provider and birth team is ‘what is the difference between a midwife and a doula?’ and ‘do I need both?’

The biggest difference between a midwife and a doula is their scope of practice. A midwife is a primary health care provider. You would see her as you would a doctor monthly, then bi-weekly then weekly and her focus is on the health of you and your baby. You will choose either a doctor or a midwife, as your primary care provider. During your pregnancy, appointments with your midwife will typically be close to an hour whereas appointments with a doctor are typically 10-15 minutes. Whether you choose a midwife or a doctor, you may also wish to hire a doula.

A doula typically plays a much more ‘personal’ role. Doulas typically come to your home and get to know you and your partner during your pregnancy. Visits may be an hour or more as you build a relationship with them and they will then be with you from the start of your labour until well after the baby is born. Doctors and midwives will typically be with you once you are close to transition and pushing.

At the birth, if you choose a doctor, they will arrive as you are ready to push. Once the baby is born they ensure the newborn is ok and then typically leave to attend another birth leaving the nurses on duty to provide ongoing care. If you choose a midwife, their job, similar to a doctor, is the clinical management of labor and delivery. Her top priority is the health of both you and the baby. She will perform vaginal exams, monitor fetal heart tones, and assess contraction patterns. She will regularly check your blood pressure and temperature and she will be charting all of the medical information related to your labor. At delivery, your midwife will help you choose optimal birth positions, catch the baby, and assess if the newborn needs any immediate assistance. After your baby is born, your midwife will tend to the delivery of your placenta and examine it. She will then check your perineum and stitch any tears that might have occurred.

The midwife’s primary responsibility peaks at the time of the birth. Midwives do provide labour support but they also have many other tasks to tend to. This is where having a doula in addition to a midwife is great! A doula’s responsibility peaks during active labor and transition, when you need the most help coping with the contractions. When your midwife is attending to clinical matters, your doula is focusing on you and helping you get through your contractions. Where the midwife's first priority is the safe delivery of mother and baby, the doula's first priority is the mother’s mental well-being.
Your doula’s job at the birth is to be there for you. She is there from the start of labour until well after the baby is born and will answer questions, give suggestions on positions and techniques to get baby in optimal positioning, help you to be more comfortable, fetch supplies, be your voice and do her best to support the birth you want. As labor becomes more challenging, your doula may provide more hands-on support through massage, position changes, verbal support, relaxation exercises, and suggestions for effective movement during contractions. She will support you with verbal and emotional support and also help your partner find effective ways to support you. She will be with you from start to finish supporting you through the amazing process of birth.

**MIDWIVES AND DOULAS MAKE A WONDERFUL TEAM!**

In Canada, midwives are licensed medical professionals and are responsible for the health of you and your child prenatally and during childbirth.

**Typical responsibilities of a midwife are:**
- Run prenatal tests
- Provide advice regarding your health during pregnancy, birth and postpartum
- Prescribe any maternal health related supplements or medications that are needed
- Perform physical examinations prenatally, during labour and postpartum
- Monitor you and baby during labour and birth
- Consult with an obstetrician if a medical complication arises which are out of the midwifery scope of practice
- Advise on birth positions
- Chart the labour and birth

Doulas are **not** medical professionals. They **provide emotional and physical support** to the birthing mother during pregnancy and birth.
Typical responsibilities of a doula are:

- Establish and build a prenatal relationship with you and your partner
- Help you visualize your labour and birth ideals
- Direct you to resources in the community
- Support you and your partner during labour
- Suggest labour and birth positions
- Help you communicate your needs to your health care provider
- Provide postpartum emotional support and help with breastfeeding initiation.

**Do I need a midwife and a doula?**

Doula support is an amazing complement to the care you will receive from your midwife. Because the midwife will have many additional responsibilities, having a doula who is there just for you can make all the difference. If you are looking for birth professionals who view pregnancy and birth as a normal, natural event, using both a midwife and a doula will give you the full spectrum of support and medical care you need.

**I am using a doctor, can I still use a doula?**

We highly recommend having a doula if you are planning a hospital birth with a doctor. They increase the likelihood of avoiding the medical interventions that are more common when you have a doctor as your primary care provider.

**HERE IS WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS**

Women who receive continuous support are more likely to have spontaneous vaginal births and less likely to have any pain medication, epidurals, negative feelings about childbirth, vacuum or forceps-assisted births, and C-sections. In addition, labours are typically shorter by about 40 minutes and the babies were less likely to have low Apgar scores at birth.


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