

COVID-19: Guide to Virtual Doula Support

This guidance is intended for doulas who work with pregnant, birthing or postpartum people. It offers health and informational guidance on providing virtual birth doula and postpartum doula support in relation to COVID-19.

COVID-19

For general information on COVID-19, including how to guard against stigma, visit nyc.gov/health/coronavirus. For real-time updates, text “COVID” to 692-692. Message and data rates may apply.

COVID-19 and People Who Are Pregnant

Based on what we know at this time, pregnant people are not more likely to be infected by the virus that causes COVID-19, but they might be at increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19 compared to non-pregnant people. There may also be an increased risk of negative pregnancy outcomes, such as preterm birth, among pregnant people with COVID-19. Finally, there have been a small number of reports of babies who may have been infected before birth, although the extent of this is unknown and is still a rare event.

Who Is Most at Risk for Serious Illness?

People of all ages can be infected by COVID-19. People who are at increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19 are adults age 50 or older (people 65 or older are at the highest risk), and people who have chronic health conditions, such as:

- Cancer
- Chronic kidney disease
- COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease)
- Immunocompromised state (weakened immune system) from solid organ transplant
- Obesity (body mass index of 30 or higher)
- Serious heart conditions, such as heart failure, coronary artery disease or cardiomyopathies
- Sickle cell disease
- Type 2 diabetes mellitus

This is not a comprehensive list and there may be other possible risk factors. For additional information, visit nyc.gov/health and search for [COVID-19 groups at higher risk](#).

People with regular close contact with someone who has or may have COVID-19 are also at higher risk of getting COVID-19. This includes people who live in the same home, caretakers who work in the home or sexual partners.

If you are an older adult or have any of the chronic health conditions listed above, it is especially important for you to carefully monitor your health, and practice physical distancing and healthy hand hygiene.

Visit nyc.gov/health/coronavirus and look for [Recommendations for Doulas](#) on the [Prevention and Groups at Higher Risk](#) page for answers to the following questions as you prepare to support your client:

- What can doulas and pregnant people do to prevent COVID-19?
- How do I practice physical distancing?
- Can I attend births in person?
- How can I best support my client if they want to or have to change their birth plan or location of delivery?
- What if my client has COVID-19?
- What can be expected after giving birth?
- What warning signs should I look for after birth?

Hospital Visitor Policy in Response to COVID-19

On April 29, 2020, Governor Andrew Cuomo issued [Executive Order 202.25](#) requiring that hospitals “allow any patient giving birth to have present with them: a support person . . . and/or a doula, who does not have symptoms of COVID-19, for the labor, delivery and the remaining duration of the patient's stay.” Some hospitals have interpreted this as allowing a single support person; others are allowing two support people, including a doula. If you are not attending the birth in person, you may still support your client virtually. This will also minimize your exposure to COVID-19 and minimize your chance of unknowingly infecting others.

What Is Virtual Doula Support?

Virtual doula support is like in-person support in many ways. Here are the biggest differences:

Labor and Birth

Instead of providing physical support, the doula provides virtual guidance on physical coping techniques for pain management to the client and to whoever is supporting the client in person. The doula provides emotional and informational support by phone, text or a video-communication app.

Postpartum

Instead of providing hands-on support, the doula applies listening skills through phone, text or a video-communication app and may use a video app to demonstrate and assess nursing or other infant feeding, newborn care, self-care and the physical recovery of the client.

When choosing an app to use, it is recommended you and your client consider the various protection levels offered by different platforms and the resulting limitations on the privacy of your conversations. You may also choose to invest in a platform that complies with the Health Insurance Portability Accountability Act (HIPAA), such as those offered by Zoom and Doxy.me.

Why Should Doulas Offer Virtual Support to Their Clients?

Doulas may feel that they will not be as effective in the virtual space and therefore should not attempt to provide services during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, even if you cannot be

physically present, your skills and the support and information you can provide will be invaluable to your clients.

Labor and Birth

Many birthing people will have a greater need for guidance from an experienced professional who has taken the time to get to know them and their preferences. Your clients may be frightened or may be coping with other stressors and changes in their life due to this pandemic. They may be wrestling with shifting birth goals. You can provide reassurance, updated information and evidence-based suggestions for how to approach labor in this time.

Postpartum

Your clients may be mourning the loss of the birth they had dreamed of. You can provide a safe space for them to grieve and process their experience. It is also completely appropriate to celebrate your clients' hard work and the new addition to their family. In many cases, you can analyze and solve nursing challenges through video communication. You can also provide your clients with updated information and evidence-based suggestions for newborn and postpartum care.

Virtual Doula Support for Labor and Birth May Consist of the Following:

- Offering face-to-face contact via FaceTime, WhatsApp, Google Hangouts, Skype, Zoom or other video-communication apps. This contact can be sustained throughout the labor or provided when the client wishes. As the doula, you can support your clients with breathing and relaxation techniques and guide them in movements and positions. You can also provide refreshers on the physiologic process of birth to reassure your clients that what they are experiencing in their body is normal, and you can answer questions and offer insight when requested.
- Encouraging your client via cell phone during contractions and pushing. Even though you're not physically present, you can still be a steady voice in your clients' ear, encouraging them to persevere.
- Guiding and coaching the partner, relative or friend who is physically present by providing positioning ideas and instructing them on ways to perform various comfort measures, such as massage and the application of counterpressure.
- Asking the client to introduce you virtually (via phone call or video) to the medical team, which can build trust and foster positive communication. If the client wishes, you can also remain present for conversations with the medical team. You will likely have a better understanding of birth-related medical terminology than your clients, and you can interpret what their care providers are saying and help them understand how to integrate this information into their birth plan.
- Providing encouragement and supporting self-advocacy. Your perspective can help your clients articulate their questions and priorities for their labor and birth, and help them in their discussions with the medical team. If your clients must decide — for instance, about a particular intervention — you can help them process the information and think through the decision.

- Reminding your clients of their rights during childbirth, which are outlined in the [New York City Standards for Respectful Care at Birth](#). Visit nyc.gov/health and search for **SRJ**.

Virtual Doula Support for the Postpartum Period May Consist of the Following:

- Offering face-to-face postpartum visits via FaceTime, WhatsApp Video, Google Hangouts, Skype Zoom or other video-communication apps. It may be useful to schedule these virtual visits in advance while also remaining flexible in the hours and days immediately after childbirth for shorter, less formal check-ins.
- Observing your clients during infant feeding and changing sessions. You can guide them in making appropriate adjustments and your words can serve as a welcome reminder they are capable of learning skills that may be entirely new to them. This can boost their self-confidence and potential for long-term success.
- Offering ideas of how other people (that are not sick) living at home with your clients can be of assistance.
- Supporting your clients in processing their birth experience.
- Assessing your clients' emotional and mental well-being. If possible, provide your clients with a digital copy of the [PHQ-9](#), [Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale](#) and [GAD-7](#) (for anxiety), and ask them to complete and share it with you in a way that is convenient for them. Your clients can access mental health resources by visiting nyc.gov/nycwell, calling 888-NYC-WELL (888-692-9355) or texting "WELL" to 65173.
- Being alert to the possibility of intimate-partner violence, which has become more common during the pandemic. Inform your clients about the NYC Domestic Violence Hotline (800-621-4673). They can also read [Resources for Survivors During COVID-19](#).
- Providing referrals to additional support services and resources, especially for clients who may be limited in their ability to shop, cook and care for the baby because of a Cesarean birth or other reason.

How Can Doulas Prepare for Providing Virtual Doula Support?

- Designate a quiet space within your home to take your client's call during labor and during postpartum visits. Familiarize yourself with the "mute" feature on your device so you can cancel out any background noise when you are not speaking. If using videoconferencing, familiarize yourself with how to place your cell phone or laptop so the client can see you clearly.
- Keep a charged phone, tablet or laptop. Make sure you have access to a power outlet in case your device's battery begins to run low.

Prepare for Virtual Support of Labor and Birth During Prenatal Visits

- Provide virtual prenatal visits, so your clients are used to interacting with you in the virtual space. Consider providing more frequent but shorter visits.
- Become familiar with your client's birth goals. The March of Dimes has published a birth-plan template that includes 15 questions related to COVID-19. Visit marchofdimes.org/materials/March-of-Dimes-Birth-Plan-2020.pdf. Create a plan with your client on when to call when labor starts and what to do if the client can't reach you right away.

- Review comfort measures with your clients and their support person. Teach the support person how to use the various comfort measures. Prepare to clear your schedule where possible, in case you are busy providing support to your client for an extended length of time and it conflicts with other commitments.
- Secure a back-up doula who can provide virtual support to your client in case you are busy providing support to a different client for an extended length of time.

Prepare for Postpartum Virtual Doula Support

- Prepare any teaching tools you plan to use for demonstrations, such as a nursing doll.
- Update your resource list, including making note of any changes to hours or types of services offered due to COVID-19.
- Have a pen and paper handy for taking notes on areas where you will need to follow up with your client.

Suggested Items and Equipment for Doulas to Provide Virtual Support

- Smartphone, computer or tablet
- Charger for the device
- Video-communication app downloaded onto the device, as chosen by the client and doula
- Wireless headphones
- Links to videos and other online resources to send to the client during labor or for their postpartum needs
- Teaching tools, pen and paper (for postpartum support)

Suggested Items and Equipment for Birthing People Receiving Virtual Doula Support

- Smartphone, computer or tablet
- Charger for the device
- Tripod or cell phone stand for the device
- Video-communication app downloaded onto the device, as chosen by the client and doula
- Wireless headphones
- Birth ball (can also be used for soothing postpartum, such as when a parent holds the baby and bounces gently on the ball)
- Rice sock, golf ball, tennis ball, handheld massager, massage oil, essential oils, and cotton balls or diffuser (for labor support)

What Are the Benefits of Virtual Doula Support?

At the core of doula work is the ability to hold space for people during labor, birth and the postpartum period. Thanks to technology, doulas can continue to show up for their clients, even if it's not in person.

Labor and Birth

Your (virtual) presence during a person's labor and birth has the potential to:

- Add an extra layer of comfort and support by letting your client either hear a familiar voice or experience patient, observant silence from you when needed.
- Affirm the laboring person's physical and mental strength and ability to labor.

- Boost the laboring person’s confidence by offering loving encouragement. Saying to your client, “You’re doing a great job” or “I know you may be feeling anxious, but your body knows what to do” can help with this, even if it’s by phone or video.
- Use your video platform to demonstrate various labor positions specific to the unique characteristics of this labor.
- Provide guidance on various comfort measures.
- Promote increased relaxation of the laboring person.

Postpartum:

Your (virtual) presence during the days and weeks after childbirth has the potential to:

- Add an extra layer of comfort and reassurance by letting your clients hear a familiar voice, and have a kind and understanding person with whom they feel comfortable sharing their feelings.
- Affirm your clients’ ability to rest and heal while also nourishing and nurturing their newborn.
- For clients who have a partner, support the couple’s relationship with each other and with the new baby.
- Boost your clients’ confidence by offering loving encouragement. Saying to your client, “You are doing an amazing job” or “You mean so much to your baby” can help with this, even if it’s by phone or video.

Like in-person support, virtual doula support during labor and the postpartum period offers the continuous presence of a trained support professional. Especially in the time of COVID-19, when hospital staff is stretched thin and clients may not have all the support from family and friends that they had counted on, this support can be vitally important for childbearing people and new parents.

Resources on Virtual Doula Support*

Several individuals and organizations have created trainings on virtual support. Here are some resources:

Penny Simkin: Supporting Clients from a Distance

Visit vimeo.com/399348440. This video covers the following:

- Preparing clients ahead of time for virtual doula support during labor
- Labor coping techniques
- Supporting the partner during labor and birth

The Digital Postpartum Doula Course (\$10 fee)

Visit 100percentdoula.teachable.com/p/the-digital-postpartum-doula. This webinar features:

- A checklist of tools and skills to gather in preparation for providing virtual doula support
- Access to the Private Facebook Digital Doulas Group following the webinar
- Access to the recorded webinar

Ancient Song Doula Services: How to Support Doula Clients Virtually (sliding-scale fee, \$25 to \$75)

Visit ancientsongdoulaservices.com/registration. This webinar addresses the following topics:

- The essence of prenatal and postpartum support
- Preparing clients for a virtual experience
- Providing comfort measures virtually

Tools and Guidance on How to Shift Your Work to an Online Platform*

Doula Trainings International: How to Offer Virtual Doula Support: Birth Work During COVID-19 (\$37 fee)

Visit doulatraininginternational.com/how-to-offer-virtual-doula-support-birth-work-during-covid/. This web page provides the following resources:

- A description of DTI's Slow Doula Method training
- A list of five considerations for framing the online support role

Additional Resources for Virtual Doulas*

- [How Virtual Doulas Can Help in the Age of Coronavirus: a blog post by boober](#)
- [Birth Support During COVID-19 with Baby Caravan](#)
- [Virtual Doula Tips and Tools with Debra Pascali-Bonaro](#) (\$15 fee)
- [Case Studies: How to Be a Digital Doula](#) (\$20 fee)

***The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene is providing this information to help New Yorkers locate services and for general information, but does not make any representation or warranty concerning the quality or accuracy of the services provided by these identified establishments.**

For more information about COVID-19, visit nyc.gov/health/coronavirus.

The NYC Health Department may change recommendations as the situation evolves.

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