

COVID-19: Guide to Virtual Doula Support

COVID-19 remains a significant risk in New York City (NYC) and across the U.S. This guidance is for doulas who work with people who are pregnant, are in labor or have recently given birth. It offers health and informational guidance on providing virtual birth-doula and postpartum-doula support during the COVID-19 public health emergency.

People who are pregnant or breastfeeding or chestfeeding may choose to be vaccinated. If you are pregnant or breastfeeding or chestfeeding, it may be helpful to discuss vaccination with your health care provider. However, you do not need clearance from a provider to be vaccinated. Pregnant people are among the groups eligible to be vaccinated, as part of New York State's phased vaccine distribution. For a full list of eligible groups, visit nyc.gov/covidvaccinedistribution. To find a vaccination site and make an appointment, visit vaccinefinder.nyc.gov. If you need assistance making an appointment at a City-run vaccination site, call 877-VAX-4NYC (877-829-4692). For information on COVID-19 vaccines, visit nyc.gov/covidvaccine.

Are people who are pregnant at a higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19?

Yes. Based on what we know at this time, people who are pregnant are at a higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19 than people who are not pregnant. People who are pregnant and have COVID-19 may also have an increased risk for preterm birth and other negative pregnancy outcomes. There have been a few reports of babies who may have been infected with COVID-19 before birth, but this seems to be [rare](#).

For more information on people at increased risk of severe COVID-19 illness, visit nyc.gov/health/coronavirus and click on "Prevention and Groups at Higher Risk" on the left side of the page.

The NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (NYC Health Department)'s [COVID-19: Recommendations for People Who Are Pregnant, Breastfeeding or Chestfeeding, or Caring for Newborns](#) includes answers to the following questions.

- What can people who are pregnant do to prevent COVID-19 transmission?
- Should I change my prenatal care appointments? What about ultrasounds?
- What should I do if I have COVID-19 symptoms or have other concerns during my pregnancy?
- Should I change my birth plan or location of birth?
- Can people with COVID-19 breastfeed or chestfeed?
- Can people with COVID-19 "room in" with their baby?
- What warning signs should I look for after birth?
- Information for people who have recently given birth ("the fourth trimester")
- Other resources for new parents

What can people who are pregnant do to prevent COVID-19 transmission?

Keep in mind these key actions to prevent COVID-19 transmission, even if you have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19:

- **Stay home if you are sick.** Stay home if you are not feeling well or recently tested positive for COVID-19.
- **Stay apart.** Stay at least 6 feet from others, when possible. Avoid large gatherings, especially indoors.
- **Wear a face covering.** Protect yourself and those around you by wearing a face covering when outside the home, and even at home if you or someone you live with is sick or was recently exposed to COVID-19. The face covering should snugly cover your nose and mouth.
- **Keep your hands clean.** Wash your hands with soap and water often and use alcohol-based hand sanitizer when soap and water are not available. Avoid touching your face with unwashed hands and cover your coughs and sneezes with your arm or a tissue, not your hands.

What is the current policy for hospital visitation during the COVID-19 public health emergency?

On April 29, 2020, Governor Andrew Cuomo issued [Executive Order No. 202.25](#), which requires hospitals in New York State (NYS) to allow patients giving birth to have present with them during labor, delivery and the duration of their hospital stay a support person and/or a doula who does not have symptoms of COVID-19. Like other COVID-19-related orders, Executive Order 202.25 is extended regularly. Encourage your client to contact their hospital in advance to learn more about its policy, and be prepared to adjust should the policy change. Note that you and any other support person(s) may be required to stay in the patient's room for the entire labor and delivery. Follow the instructions of the hospital staff; they are designed to keep you and your client (the person who is pregnant) safe.

On December 15, 2020, the NYS Department of Health issued a [letter](#) to NYS hospitals and birthing facilities clarifying that every birthing person may be accompanied during their inpatient stay by a doula in addition to their designated support person. The letter stated that current Executive Orders and NYS Department of Health guidance do not require hospitals to request or mandate that doulas accompanying birthing people provide proof of certification when entering a birthing facility, citing this is as an example of an “undue burden” on doulas and their clients. Hospitals and birthing facilities must provide personal protective equipment (PPE) for all support people accompanying the birthing person during labor, delivery and while receiving postpartum care, and must take reasonable steps to facilitate virtual or web-based doula support whenever possible.

For more information about your client's rights during childbirth, see the [New York City Standards for Respectful Care at Birth](#). For more information and resources on sexual and reproductive justice, visit nyc.gov/health and search for **SRJ**.

What is virtual doula support?

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

- **During Labor and Birth:** Instead of providing physical support, the doula provides virtual guidance on physical coping techniques for pain management to the client and whoever is supporting the client in person. The doula provides emotional and informational support by phone, text or a video communication application (app).
- **After Birth:** Instead of providing hands-on support, the doula applies listening skills through phone, text or a video-communication app, and may use a video communication platform to visually demonstrate and assess nursing or other infant feeding, newborn care, self-care and the physical recovery of the client.

When choosing a video communication platform to use, you and your client should consider the protection and privacy that different platforms offer. 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 public health emergency. However, even if you cannot be physically present, you should offer virtual support because your skills and the support and information you can provide will be invaluable to your clients.

- **During Labor and Birth:** Many birthing people will have a greater need for the counsel of 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 COVID-19. They may be wrestling with shifting birth goals. You can provide reassurance, updated information and evidence-based suggestions for how to approach labor during this time.
- **After Birth:** Your clients may be mourning the loss of the birth they had dreamed of, and 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.

What are the benefits of virtual doula support?

At the core of doula work is the ability to hold space for people during labor and birth and during the postpartum period. Technology allows doulas to continue to serve their clients from afar.

- **During Labor and Birth:** Your virtual presence during a client's labor and after they have given 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 is by phone or video.
- Use your video communication 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.
- **After Birth:** Your presence (in person or virtual) during the days and weeks after childbirth has the potential to:
 - Add an extra layer of comfort and reassurance by letting your client hear a familiar voice and have a kind and understanding person with whom they feel comfortable sharing their feelings.
 - Affirm your client’s 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 client’s 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 is by phone or video.

Like in-person support, virtual doula support during labor and after childbirth 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.

What are examples of virtual doula support during labor and birth?

- Offering face-to-face contact via FaceTime, WhatsApp Video, Google Hangouts, Skype, Zoom or other video communication platforms. This contact can be sustained throughout the labor or provided when the client wishes. As a doula, you can support your client 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 client that what they are experiencing in their body is normal, and you can answer questions and offer insight when requested.
- Encouraging your client via phone during contractions and during pushing. Even though you are not physically present, you can still be a steady voice in your client’s ear, encouraging them to persevere.
- Guiding and coaching your client’s 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 your client to introduce you virtually (via phone or video communication platform) 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 client, and you can interpret what their health 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 client ask questions and articulate their priorities for their labor and birth, and help them in their discussions with the medical team. If your clients must make a decision – for instance, about a particular intervention – you can help them process the information and think through the decision.
- Reminding your client 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**.

What are examples of virtual doula support for the postpartum period?

- Offering face-to-face postpartum visits via FaceTime, WhatsApp Video, Google Hangouts, Skype Zoom or other video communication platform. It may be useful to schedule these virtual visits in advance while also remaining flexible in the hours and days immediately after birth for shorter, less formal check-ins.
- Observing your client during infant feeding and changing sessions. You can guide your client in making appropriate adjustments, and your words can serve as a welcome reminder that 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 living at home with your client can be of assistance (assuming they are not sick).
- Supporting your client in processing their birth experience.
- Assessing your client’s emotional and mental well-being. If possible, provide your client with copies of the [PHQ-9](#), [Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale](#) and/or [GAD-7](#) (for anxiety) and ask them to complete it and share it with you in a way that is convenient for them. Your client 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 domestic and gender-based violence, which has become more common during the COVID-19 public health emergency. Domestic and gender-based violence can include intimate partner and family violence, elder abuse, sexual assault, stalking, and human trafficking. Inform your clients about NYC’s 24-hour Domestic Violence Hotline (800-621-4673). They can also visit nyc.gov and search for **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 or care for their baby because of a Cesarean birth or other reason.

How can doulas prepare for providing virtual doula support during the prenatal period, and during labor and birth?

- Designate a quiet space within your home to “meet” with your client for prenatal visits and during labor whether by phone or a video communication app.

- Familiarize yourself with the “mute” feature on your device so you can cancel out any background noise when you are not speaking. If using video conferencing, familiarize yourself with how to place your cell phone or laptop so the client can see you clearly.
- If you decide to use a video communication app to provide virtual doula support, ensure that your client is also familiar with said app.
- 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.
- Provide virtual prenatal visits so your client is 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. Create a plan with your client on when to call when labor starts, and what to do if the client cannot reach you right away.
- Review comfort measures with your client 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 backup 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.

How can doulas prepare for postpartum virtual doula support?

- Prepare 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.

What are some suggested items and equipment for doulas to facilitate virtual doula support?

- Smartphone, computer or tablet
- Charger for device
- Video communication app chosen by client and doula downloaded onto device
- Wireless headphones
- Links to videos and other online resources to send to your client during labor or after labor for their postpartum needs
- Teaching tools you plan to use for demonstrations
- Pen and paper for taking notes

What are some suggested items and equipment for people who are giving birth and receiving virtual doula support?

- Smartphone, computer or tablet
- Charger for device
- Tripod or smartphone stand for device
- Video-communication app downloaded onto device, as chosen by 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)
- For labor support: rice sock, golf ball, tennis ball, handheld massager, massage oil, essential oils and cotton balls or diffuser

Where can I find recommendations and resources for doulas during the COVID-19 public health emergency?

The NYC Health Department’s “[COVID-19: Recommendations for Doulas](#)” includes answers to the following questions.

- What can doulas and people who are pregnant do to prevent COVID-19?
- As a doula, 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 my client gives birth?

Resources on Virtual Doula Support*

Several individuals and organizations have created trainings on virtual doula 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

Doula Trainings International: Digital Doula: How to Bring Your Doula Practice Online, Free

Visit wearedti.podia.com/digital-doula.

This course provides the following resources:

- Practical tips on setting up a doula practice for virtual support
- Best practices for creating and maintaining a doula practice during times of hospital restriction

- Encouragement to think about how this new framework may help sustain one in their role as a doula

Case Studies: How to Be a Digital Doula (\$20 fee)

Visit carriagehousebirth.teachable.com/p/case-studies-how-to-be-a-digital-doula.

This course will explore digital doula work by addressing the following topics:

- What is working, what isn't.
- Updating your documents and resources.
- How to prepare your clients, and much more.

Additional Resources for Virtual Doulas*

Other virtual doula support resources include boober's [How Virtual Doulas Can Help in the Age of Coronavirus](#) and Baby Caravan's [Birth Support During COVID-19](#).

***The NYC Health Department is providing this information to assist New Yorkers in locating services and for general information but does not make any representation or warranty concerning the quality or accuracy of the services provided by the identified establishments.**

For more information on COVID-19, visit nyc.gov/health/coronavirus or text "COVID" to 692-692 for real-time updates. Message and data rates may apply.

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

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