What is a Doula?
The term doula is defined as: “a Greek word meaning a woman who serves. In labour support terminology, doula refers to a specially trained birth companion (not a friend or loved one) who provides labour support. She performs no clinical tasks. Doula also refers to laywomen who are trained or experienced in providing postpartum care (mother and newborn care, breastfeeding support and advice, cooking, child care, errands, and light cleaning) for the new family. To distinguish between the two types of doulas, the term birth doula and postpartum doula are used.”

What is the difference between a midwife and a Doula?

Doulas do not provide medical care, and do not deliver babies. Midwives are trained to provide all necessary medical care and ensure the health and well being of the mother and baby. Doulas work as a part of the team, with a midwife or doctor and nurse, and are a positive addition to the birth team for those couples who desire extra support.

What do Doula services cost?
Currently doula services can range between $250–$800.00 per childbirth, although some clinics have provided similar services to clients within First Nations communities in Canada. Across Canada, many First Nations communities and organizations are finding new ways of incorporating doula training and care in their communities.

How can I become a Doula?
Contact one of the national associations to discuss the training closet to you. Once you have become a certified doula you may register with a Doula Association. Culturally specific doula training for First Nations is being developed in several provinces across Canada, including British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, and Quebec.

BENEFITS OF UNINTERRUPTED LABOUR SUPPORT VS BIRTHS WITHOUT CONTINUOUS SUPPORT

Scott et al. (1999) analyzed 12 clinical studies and found that there was a:
- 51% reduction in caesarean births
- 25% reduction in labour length (average of 98 minutes)
- 30% reduction in analgesia
- 71% reduction in oxytocin augmentation
- 57% reduction in use of forceps/vacuum
- 35% reduction in analgesia
- 51% reduction in caesarian births
- 71% reduction in oxytocin augmentation

VS BIRTHS WITHOUT CONTINUOUS SUPPORT

Benjamin et al. (2004) showed the following:
- 57% reduction in use of forceps/vacuum
- 64% reduction in oxytocin augmentation
- 35% reduction in analgesia
- 35% reduction in overall obstetrical interventions
- 51% reduction in caesarian births

DOULA SUPPORT HAS SIX MAIN FUNCTIONS

These are to:
- Recognize birth as a key life experience.
- Nurture and protect a woman’s memory of birth.
- Maintain an uninterrupted presence during labour and birth.
- Recognize the effects of emotion on the physiology of labour.
- Provide comfort techniques and encourage positive feelings during the birth process.
- Promote early breastfeeding and bonding.

For First Nations families, doulas have the potential to make specific contributions to situations where women are birthing away from their home communities. They can act as communicators and advocates for the birthing family, and can facilitate incorporating traditional practices into the birthing process, if the family desires this.

Traditionally, women supporting women during childbirth has been an important part of the birthing process. It is described as an ancient and widespread practice, and that “one of the most profound changes in the birthing process during the 20th century was to isolate the birthing women from her social support network.” For First Nations families, this impact is often greater, especially in remote regions where women are required to leave their home communities to give birth.

Although there has been no research done about doula care specific to First Nations people in Canada, there have been numerous studies illustrating that continuous social support during labour has positive impacts on not only labour and delivery, but also on breastfeeding rates and attachment.

“This is the place of power. It is the woman’s power to give birth. And it is our role to help her come to that place where she feels that strength and finds the strength to do this.”

CHRISTINE ROY, MIDWIFE

First Nations Families & Doulas

What a doula is and its benefits

The Turtle Women chose to be called “American Indian.” Likewise, in a First Nations community, the name “Turtle Women” is often replaced with another term. At the American Indian Family Center in St. Paul, Minnesota, the term “DONA certified training.” Carol Lynch, a DONA certified doula, was given the name “Toumessahehe,” meaning “Holding Women” in her Northern Cheyenne language class when she described her profession. In Kanesatake, Québec, “Toonova’hehe,” meaning “she who helps the mother.”

“The woman’s power to give birth. It is the most sacred ceremony of our tribes. It is the most powerful ceremony that we have.”

CAROL COUSCHIE, MIDWIFE

First Nations Myths & Customs


2. Turtle Women. Mothering in Indigenous Communities

3. Maimbolwa, Margaret C. Maternity Care in Zambia


5. Kanesatake, Québec, Québec.

6. DRAFT. April 2006. A Toolbox

