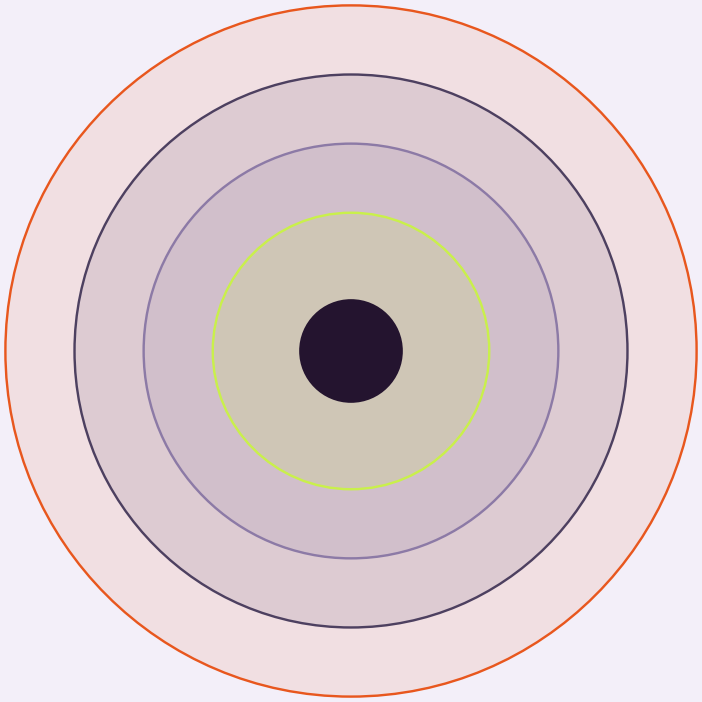


Ina May's Guide to Childbirth

A reading of the book by Ina May Gaskin (2003)

1. ACTION BOOK

Inside this edition

The book in a minute 3

The takeaways 4

Your action book 6

Before you go 7

PART TWO · THE ACTION BOOK

The setup checklist 9

Practise a loose jaw for five minutes 10

Name one fear and take it to an appointment 11

Move gently every day 12

ABOUT THIS EDITION

This is HourLife's reading of Ina May's Guide to Childbirth, in our own words. It is not a substitute for the book.

BEFORE YOU START 01

The book in a minute

Ina May Gaskin is an American midwife who helped found The Farm, a community in Summertown, Tennessee, and the midwifery practice that grew up there. Her book argues that birth is a normal process the body is built for, and that fear, hurry and a disturbing setting can slow it down. The first part is a collection of birth stories, mostly from women who gave birth with the Farm midwives. The second part is her guidance: how labour works, her Sphincter Law about privacy and feeling safe, ways of meeting the sensations of labour, and how to choose a care provider and a place of birth. She also looks at common hospital interventions and asks when each one is needed.

Below are the 9 ideas HourLife readers vote up most, each in our words with a note on what it asks of you, and then the steps that put them to work.

WHAT READERS KEEP

The takeaways

1 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Your body is not a faulty machine; birth is a normal process it was built to do.

This is the ground the whole book stands on. Gaskin argues that many women arrive at labour expecting their bodies to fail, and that this belief can shape what happens. She offers years of births at The Farm as her evidence that most labours unfold well with time, patience and support.

2 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Good birth stories change what you expect, and what you expect changes how you labour.

The first half of the book is birth stories told by the mothers themselves. Gaskin puts them first on purpose: most people hear frightening stories long before they hear calm ones. Reading many ordinary, positive births gives a pregnant reader a different picture to carry into labour.

3 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The cervix behaves like other sphincters: it opens best in privacy and cannot be ordered open.

Gaskin calls this the Sphincter Law. She compares the cervix to the body's other sphincters, which work best when a person feels private and unwatched. Nobody opens on command, so pressure and deadlines tend to work against labour rather than for it. This is her model from midwifery practice, not an established medical finding.

4 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Fear can slow a labour, and feeling safe again can let it move.

Part of the Sphincter Law is that an opening sphincter can close again if the person is suddenly frightened or disturbed. Gaskin describes labours that stalled when a mother became afraid and picked up once the fear was talked through. Naming fears before labour, with the people who will be there, is one practical answer.

5 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

A loose jaw and a soft mouth help the rest of the body let go.

Gaskin links tension in the mouth and throat with tension lower down. She encourages slow breath, an open relaxed mouth, low sounds and even laughter during labour. It costs nothing to practise in pregnancy, and many people find it helps them stay calmer whatever else they choose.

6 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The room is part of the care: low light, quiet and familiar faces matter.

If labour responds to feeling safe, then the setting is not decoration. Gaskin pays attention to who is in the room, how often people come and go, and how much the mother is watched and timed. Small changes such as dimming lights or limiting visitors are often possible in any setting, including a hospital.

7 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Labour is intense, and how you meet the sensations changes how they feel.

Gaskin writes about pain in labour as something that can be met with movement, touch, water, breath and good company, and the Farm midwives encouraged mothers to stay with each contraction rather than brace against it. The book also covers medical pain relief. Whether you use it is your choice to make with your care team, and an epidural is a good birth too.

8 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Choose who attends your birth as carefully as where it happens.

Gaskin urges readers to interview midwives and doctors before they commit, and to ask how they usually handle labour rather than rely on reputation. The attitude of the person attending can shape the whole experience. HourLife's version: bring your questions to an early appointment and notice how they are answered.

9 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Medical help saves lives; ask that each intervention have a reason.

Gaskin is critical of interventions done by routine rather than need, such as inductions for convenience or high caesarean rates, while accepting that some births need them. Many obstetricians disagree with parts of her view, especially on home birth. Her name is also on an obstetric technique, the Gaskin manoeuvre, used by trained attendants when a baby's shoulder gets stuck.

PUT IT TO WORK

Your action book

Do the setup steps once, then keep the habits going. The setup changes your week; the habits keep it changed after the first good one.

The download puts this whole reading and a printable action book in one PDF: the setup checklist, then a page of real calendar days for each habit, starting on the day you choose.

SET UP ONCE

- [ ] Book a birth preferences talk
- [ ] Learn the warning signs and save the number
- [ ] Read three calm birth stories
- [ ] See the place where you'll give birth
- [ ] Brief your birth partner

KEEP UP DAILY

- ◯ Practise a loose jaw for five minutes
- ◯ Name one fear and take it to an appointment
- ◯ Move gently every day

30 days · Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Part two, after the reading, prints each of these as a page to fill in by hand.

THE LAST WORD

Before you go

Pick one step from the action book and do it today. An idea from a book starts to count once it changes what one ordinary day looks like.

PART TWO

The action book

Change the setup once, then keep it up. 5 setup actions to do once, and 3 habits to mark each day for 30 days.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Print it, or write on it in any PDF app.

SET UP ONCE

The setup checklist

Each of these is done once. Do one a day, and check it off when it is done.

- [ ] SETUP 1

Book a birth preferences talk

Ask your midwife or obstetrician for time at your next appointment to talk through what matters to you in labour.

Bring a one-page list and ask what is possible where you plan to give birth.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 2

Learn the warning signs and save the number

Write down the signs your care team says need an urgent call, such as bleeding, a severe headache, changes in your vision, fewer movements, fever or your waters breaking early.

Save your maternity unit's number in your phone and your partner's.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 3

Read three calm birth stories

Read three positive stories this week, from the book or from people you trust, including at least one hospital birth.

Note one thing from each that you would like in your own labour.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 4

See the place where you'll give birth

Book a tour of the ward or birth centre, or ask for a video tour.

Look for what you can change: the lights, a bath, a ball, where your partner can sit.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 5

Brief your birth partner

Sit down with the person who will be with you and go through your preferences line by line.

Agree on how they will speak up for you, and how they will step back if plans change.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

DAILY HABIT 1 OF 3

Practise a loose jaw for five minutes

Once a day, sit or lie comfortably, let your jaw drop and your lips go soft, and breathe out slowly through your mouth.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
16 ○	17 ○	18 ○	19 ○	20 ○	21 ○	22 ○
23 ○	24 ○	25 ○	26 ○	27 ○	28 ○	29 ○
30 ○						

December 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 2 OF 3

Name one fear and take it to an appointment

When a worry about birth comes up, write it down in one line.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 3 OF 3

Move gently every day

Walk, swim or stretch for a short while most days, as your care team advises for your pregnancy.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
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30 ○						

December 2026

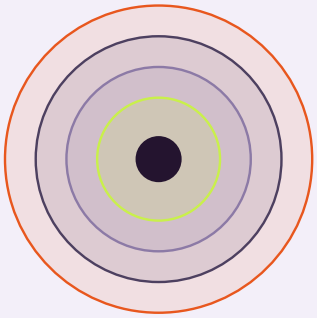
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP



Labour goes best when the mother feels safe, so plan for safety first, whichever way the baby arrives.

HOURLIFE NOTE AFTER INA MAY GASKIN