

Signs and Stages of Labor

Signs of Labor

True labor occurs when you experience regular, uncomfortable contractions. During early labor you may have contractions and/or discomfort in the lower back area. Some women will experience tightening sensations in the lower abdomen similar to menstrual cramps. Early contractions will cause mild discomfort, be irregular, and may last only a few seconds at a time. As labor progresses, your contractions will become stronger and more uncomfortable. They will be longer in duration and will occur in a predictable pattern. Some contractions may last as long as sixty to ninety seconds with only two to three minutes in between each one.

What is a contraction?

A contraction is the rhythmic squeezing of the uterine muscle which causes labor. Braxton Hicks contractions or false labor contractions are irregular, non-painful sensations felt when the uterus tightens and relaxes during pregnancy. True contractions are normally longer, stronger, and closer together. They will be predictable and occur in a regular pattern. True contractions often start in the lower back and radiate around to the lower abdominal area. Some women will have lower abdominal cramping which feels similar to menstrual cramps. True labor contractions will continue even if you rest or drink plenty of water. True labor contractions will cause your cervix to dilate and efface.

How do I time my contractions?

Contractions are timed from the beginning of one contraction to the beginning of the next contraction. During early labor contractions will be short and irregular. As labor progresses contractions will be longer, more intense, and will come in a regular pattern.

What should I do if I think I'm in labor?

You should contact our office if you are experiencing true labor symptoms (more than about 6 contractions per hour) before 37 weeks of pregnancy. After 37 weeks, try comfort measures while timing your contractions in early labor. If it's your first baby, call or come to the hospital when your contractions are moderate, regular and coming about 5 minutes apart for 1-2 hours. If it's not your first baby, remember that subsequent labors are often shorter. You should call or come to the hospital when your contractions are about 7 minutes apart. If you're not sure if you're experiencing labor, do not be afraid to call or go to labor and delivery to be evaluated.

Signs and Stages of Labor (Cont'd)

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What if I think my water is broken?

Many women notice an increase in vaginal discharge during pregnancy, but if you experience heavy discharge with color, odor, itching or irritation notify your provider.

If your amniotic membranes rupture (your water breaks) you may notice a sudden large gush of fluid, a small continuous trickle of fluid, or even a feeling of increased persistent vaginal wetness or dampness. Amniotic fluid is generally clear and odorless. If you think your water is broken you should call the office or go to labor and delivery for evaluation.

Stages of Labor

Stage One of labor occurs when the cervix dilates (opens up) and effaces (thins out). Your cervix will dilate from zero to ten centimeters. The first stage of labor consists of three different phases.

Early Labor

During the early phase of labor your cervix will be dilated between 0 and 3 centimeters. This phase can last several hours to several days. Your contractions will be very mild and irregular at first. You should begin timing your contractions and try to rest and relax. Increase your fluids, and eat light foods. During early labor you can stay at home where you will be most comfortable while waiting for your contractions to become longer, stronger, and closer together.

Active Labor

During the active phase of labor your cervix will be dilated between 4 and 7 centimeters. This phase usually last around 5-7 hours which averages out to be about a centimeter per hour. Keep in mind that your labor may be shorter or longer depending on many different circumstances. Your contractions will be regular, moderate, and painful. Often you will not be able to walk or talk through active labor contractions. Continue your relaxation techniques and come to labor and delivery during this phase.

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Transition Labor

Transition labor occurs when your cervix is 8-10 centimeters dilated. This is the most difficult phase because you are nearing the time for delivery. The transition phase of labor is usually the shortest, lasting between 30 minutes and two hours. You will feel strong contractions and be very uncomfortable especially during the peaks of labor pains. You may also have pelvic pressure and feel an urge similar to when you need to have a bowel movement. During this phase, controlled breathing is very important. It is important to not push or bear down unless you are completely of fully dilated (10 cm). Trembling and nausea are also very common as you reach the plateau of labor just before pushing and delivery.

Stage Two begins when you reach 10 centimeters dilation. This stage involves the pushing & delivery of the baby. During a vaginal delivery, usually 1 or 2 support people may be present in the labor/delivery room with you. Your family can wait in the family waiting areas during this time. When pushing you will be in a reclined position in bed with your legs raised and pulled back to you. You will only push with the guidance of your nurse when you are completely dilated. When you push during contractions, you will bear down in your pelvic area as if you were having a bowel movement.

Stage Three occurs when the placenta or afterbirth is delivered. This normally occurs within five to twenty minutes after delivery of the baby. Sometimes the doctor will ask you to push gently. There is usually no pain when the placenta is delivered, and most women are unaware of when this happens.