

## What to expect in labour

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*This article gives you an overview of the 'normal' labour process, and tells you what to expect. We also discuss some of the complications that can occur, and how they might be resolved.*

Pregnancy and the birth of a baby is a unique and special time in a woman's life. It is a time of significant change, not only physically, but also socially and emotionally. Furthermore, adjusting to parenthood is a challenging but rewarding experience for most.

### **Where shall I have my baby?**

Where you plan to have your baby is an important choice, and is individual to each woman. The choices are:

- home
- birth centre (either alongside a main obstetric unit or stand-alone)
- hospital consultant unit

The 'where' is dependent on the choices available in the locality. Importantly, however, it is your medical and previous childbearing history that must be taken into account and you will have the opportunity to discuss with a midwife the choices available to you. Birth in most cases is a natural, healthy and normal event, and usually can be achieved with very little intervention or instruction. If however, there are any complications identified in your history or during pregnancy, then a consultant

unit in hospital will be recommended. Ultimately, the carers planning and providing your care want you to have a safe, positive and enriching start to parenthood.

The article makes reference to contacting the hospital throughout if advice is required. However, depending on the area you live, or if a homebirth is planned, you may be advised to contact a midwife directly.

### **How can I prepare in advance for labour?**

- Arrange the support of a birth partner(s). Many women choose their partner; others their mother, sister, or friend. Choose someone who you feel comfortable with, who will give you encouragement, is confident to support you and is relaxed about his or her role as supportive companion. Having more than one birth partner can ensure that someone you know is with you all of the time.
- Be well informed. Many women fear the ‘pain’ of labour more than anything else, which can cause anxiety, tension, and uses up valuable energy, which can make labour more painful and exhausting. If you know what to expect, you can have some idea about what you would want for yourself. Your womb or uterus is a large muscle that has to work really hard to open up the cervix or neck of the womb. Imagine if you had no warning that your baby was about to be born—think of how frightening that would be! Labour is hard work and usually takes many hours from the first signs until the baby is born. The ‘tightenings’ or period-like pains experienced during the last few weeks of pregnancy help to soften the cervix. As labour becomes established, the tightenings become stronger and last longer. These help to dilate the cervix and help the baby get into position for the birth.
- Consider writing a birth plan. This is often requested in the early days of pregnancy. It can be difficult to explain what you want in between contractions, and you will not feel like listening to lengthy explanations!

- Consider hiring a TENS machine. TENS (transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation) is a natural way of encouraging your body to produce its own painkillers called endorphins. It also interrupts the pain pathways from your womb to your brain. It consists of four pads that are positioned either side of the spine, which deliver electrical pulses to the nerves, and a hand-held control unit. TENS is best used in early labour, when you are usually at home. They can be hired from a chemist or are sometimes available in hospital. Ask your midwife for further information.

### **How will I know when my labour has started?**

Every labour is different and it is important to remember that there is no set pattern or timing of events. As a general guide, there are three main things to look for:

- A mucousy show (or plug), usually a blood-stained or pinkish-streaked, jelly-like substance, can occur anytime from 37 weeks onwards. You don't need to do anything. If however, you notice fresh blood loss you should contact the hospital.
- Regular contractions. There will be a change in the strength and length of contractions as they get into a regular pattern, and will be different from what you have experienced before. As a guide, when true labour is underway, you will be having painful, regular contractions, at least one every 5 minutes, each lasting around a minute. With each contraction, it will become increasingly difficult to focus on anything else. Stay at home as long as you can so that nothing interferes with your labour becoming established. Coming into hospital too early, can sometimes slow down or stop your labour.
- Your waters (membranes) may break—this is when the bag of fluid (known as liquor) surrounding your baby breaks and the fluid escapes without you having any control over it. If you think your waters have broken it is important to ring the hospital to get further advice.

#### **Ring for advice if:**

- you haven't felt the baby move as much as usual
- you have any fresh red blood loss
- you think your waters have broken
- you are having strong, regular and painful contractions at least every 5 minutes apart, lasting about a minute
- you are worried

If you are unsure whether your labour has started, chances are it hasn't!! You can telephone the hospital for advice 24 hours a day. Depending on your situation, you may be advised to stay at home or go to hospital for a check-up.

### **How can I help myself in early labour?**

- Stay at home for as long as you can; it is much more comfortable than hospital, and is the best place to be for as long as possible. However, if pregnancy is complicated or you are booked for a caesarean section, phone for advice.
- Relax and stay calm. Relaxation does not just mean relaxed muscles; it also means having a calm mind and feeling confident that birth is a natural process and that your body is strong enough to cope.

### **How long will labour take?**

Every labour is different. It is normal for the first part to take a few days of irregular pains. Try not to clockwatch or wear yourself out. Take plenty of rest, eat nourishing food and have plenty of drinks. As a general guide, with your first baby it can take 8-14 hours once your labour has become properly established.

Labour is divided into three stages:

#### **First stage**

Established labour is the period of time during which the cervix dilates from 3–4 cm to 10 cm (fully dilated), and you experience regular and painful contractions. You will notice that your contractions have a regular pattern and are closer together, becoming more intense and lasting longer. During the first stage you will usually be able to walk around and find comfortable positions to help ease your discomfort. Research tells us that women who remain upright often find that labour is quicker and less painful.

Your midwife will monitor your progress during labour by assessing the following:

- length, strength, and frequency of your contractions
- blood pressure, temperature, and pulse
- vaginal examination/internal to check how far your cervix has dilated
- your baby's wellbeing

## **Your baby's wellbeing**

If your pregnancy has been 'normal' and there are no problems in labour, your midwife will listen to baby every 15 minutes or so using a Pinnards (plastic, trumpet-shaped instrument) or Sonicaid.

Continuous monitoring (or trace) of the baby's heart rate is sometimes recommended if:

- baby is thought to be smaller than average for your dates
- you have high blood pressure or other complication of pregnancy
- your baby shows any sign of distress including meconium (see later)
- you need a drip to help boost the strength and frequency of your contractions
- you are expecting twins
- you have had a previous caesarean section.

To do this we use a cardio-tocograph machine (CTG). Your baby's heart rate will be monitored continuously and recorded on paper. If you need a CTG throughout your labour, you can still stand up, sit on a chair, or kneel on all fours. Your midwife can assist you to get into a comfortable position.

## **Eating and drinking in labour**

If your pregnancy is uncomplicated, drink plenty and eat light energy foods such as fruit and toast if you feel like it.

### **Early labour advice**

- Stay calm
- Move around and get into a comfortable position
- Focus on something else—watch a video or listen to music
- Try a warm bath in a dimly-lit room
- Relax and close your eyes between contractions
- Remain at home for as long as possible

## **Passing urine**

You will be encouraged to try and pass urine regularly to avoid any damage to your bladder. If you are unable to pass urine because you have an epidural, you may be asked if you would be happy to have a catheter inserted to help avoid long-term bladder problems.

## **Transitional phase**

The end of the first stage (which is on average 10–12 hours after labour is established) is marked by the ‘transitional phase’. Women who are close to giving birth may suddenly and quite dramatically become shivery, sweaty, and may feel out of control. This phase does not last for very long and it is a good sign that the baby will be born soon. Your birth partner and midwife will be there to reassure and encourage you.

## **Second stage**

This stage begins once your cervix is 10 cm dilated and ends with the birth of your baby. The midwife will want to listen to your baby’s heart rate more often, usually after each contraction. Some women will feel an overwhelming urge to bear down as soon as their cervix is fully dilated, while others may have a short rest where the contractions slow down and you have chance to get your breath back. When you have reached the second stage, you can actively use the pain to push your baby down through the birth canal. This often means that you will not experience the contraction pains in the way that you did during the first stage of labour. Women often feel the contractions as ‘expulsive urges’ like needing to have your bowels open. We encourage you to listen to your body and push or bear down when you have the urge to do so.

As baby’s head emerges you will feel stinging and burning sensations due to the skin stretching. It can feel quite intense, but will only last for a few contractions and it goes when the baby is born. There is then a short wait before the next contraction so that baby can rotate its shoulders to fit neatly through the pelvis, and with the next contraction the baby is born.

If your labour and birth is straightforward, your midwife will be present. If you experience any complications with labour or birth a doctor or doctors will be asked to attend. Your midwife will keep you informed throughout.

Once your baby has been born, providing there is no problem with you or your baby, you will be offered the opportunity for a period of unhurried 'skin-to-skin' contact with your baby, ideally for not less than 30 minutes. Research tells us that this will help bonding between you and your baby. It is also helpful for that first important breastfeed and breastfeeding success thereafter.

### **Third stage (delivery of the placenta or afterbirth)**

This follows the birth of your baby and ends with delivery of the placenta. You may not even notice this stage, although you may experience some period-like pains. You may let your placenta deliver naturally or an injection of a hormone can be given at the time of the birth, which reduces your risk of bleeding. Either way, your midwife will discuss the best option for you.

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#### **Will I need stitches?**

Once the placenta is out, the vagina and perineum (skin between the vagina and anus) will be checked to see if you need any stitches. This can be uncomfortable, but you can use the gas and air machine. Many having their first baby will experience some damage to the vagina and perineum. This is usually slight and the skin will heal nicely if left alone.

However, if the tear is bleeding or deep, you will be advised to have stitches to help it heal. A local anaesthetic will be given to numb the area before stitching. Your midwife will also advise you how to care for the stitches.

#### **What happens after the birth?**

The baby will be weighed and measured. You will be offered refreshments and assisted to freshen up. If you are in hospital, you will either go onto the postnatal ward or you may be able to go home.

## **Complications**

Sometimes, labour and birth don't go totally to plan, and you might need some assistance. This is explained in other articles

## **New baby**

The first few hours and days with your baby are very special, and you should try to make the most of them, even if for some reason life as a new parent did not get off to the perfect start you had hoped for. It takes time to adjust to your new role and it is important to remember that you may experience some very powerful and mixed emotions. For some parents, love comes instantly but for others it takes time. Just be kind to yourself, spend as much relaxed time with your baby as you can, and take one step at a time.

## **Summary**

The birth of a baby is a significant life-changing event. Preparing for the labour and birth is important, so that you can plan your wishes in advance. Don't forget to stay calm and relaxed and remain in control of your wishes. Ask if you feel unsure about what is happening. If you can remain upright and move around, labour is often much more bearable. Spend as long as you can at home before going to hospital, providing there are no worries about you or your baby. Don't forget, you can seek advice 24 hours a day.

