

# Early labour

## Introduction

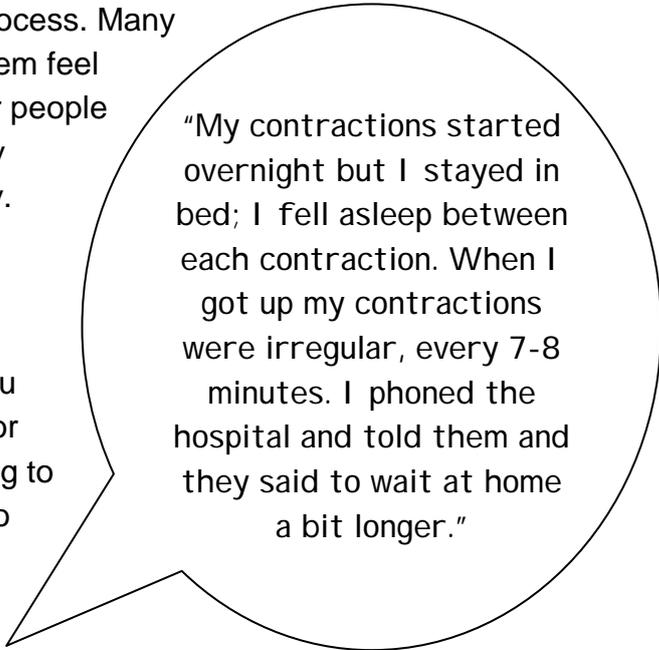
You and your baby are unique and your labour and your baby's birth will be too. There are some experiences that we know a lot of women have in the early stages of labour (often called the latent phase of labour) and this leaflet has been written to give you some advice and to help you cope with these.

## Home = the best place to be in early labour

Labour is both a physical and a psychological process. Many women have told us that being at home helps them feel more relaxed, as they are surrounded by familiar people and things. This can help you cope with the early stage of labour and help it progress more quickly.

You will usually be encouraged to stay at home during this part of your labour, because it is the safest place for you to be.

If it is your first baby, it can be difficult to tell if you are in established labour so it is quite common for women to be advised to stay at home after talking to a midwife on the phone. Sometimes, women who come into hospital to be assessed by a midwife are also advised to return home if they are not yet in established labour.



"My contractions started overnight but I stayed in bed; I fell asleep between each contraction. When I got up my contractions were irregular, every 7-8 minutes. I phoned the hospital and told them and they said to wait at home a bit longer."

## About the latent phase (early labour)

Labour can often take some time before it becomes well established. If this is your first baby, it is helpful to be prepared for the beginning of your labour to unfold gradually and gently. The latent phase of labour can be the longest part of your labour and on average can last for 12-14 hours, but it is not unusual for some women to experience a latent phase of up to 2-3 days.

Before labour, your cervix (neck of your womb) is quite hard, about 2-3cms long (although this varies from woman to woman) and tightly closed; although if you have had a baby before it may already be open a small amount. During the latent phase of labour your cervix softens, thins out and starts to open. Once your cervix has opened to about 4cms,

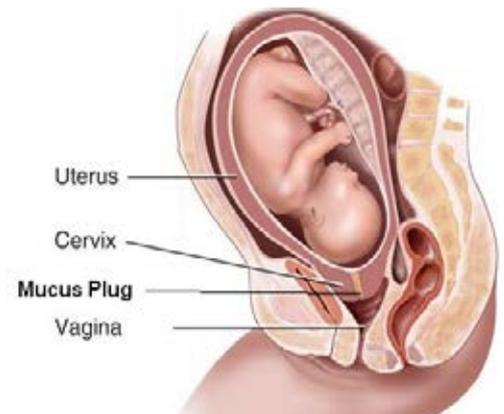
this would be classed as the start of the active phase of labour. Even though the latent phase of labour may have been a long process, once you are in the active phase your progress will tend to be quicker and steadier. It is at this point that a midwife would need to be monitoring you and your baby more regularly.

## Recognising the signs of early labour

There is no single, definite sign to show that you are in early labour. You might experience some or all of the following:

- A 'show' – You might notice a mucousy discharge in your underwear or when you wipe after going to the toilet. It can be clear, brown or bloodstained. It can come out in one piece or in several pieces over a few hours or days. This is the 'plug' (or operculum) that has sealed the entrance to your uterus preventing infection, throughout your pregnancy. This can be a sign that labour is about to start as it often becomes dislodged when your cervix begins to change consistency. However, it can still be up to a week or two before your labour starts.
- Backache or period-type cramps – Often, labour can start with backache or period-type cramps. You might be aware that your tummy also becomes tight when you experience the pain. These are sometimes called 'tightening's'. They can be uncomfortable and they are often irregular and can stop and start.
- Contractions – Your 'tightening's' can turn into more painful contractions. These are usually felt as pain and tightness in your abdomen, but some women still feel them just in their back. In the early phase of labour these contractions are commonly irregular, meaning:
  - They are 'uncoordinated', for example, sometimes coming every 10 minutes, sometimes coming after three minutes.
  - They vary in strength, sometimes they are very strong and painful and sometimes they are milder.
  - They last for different lengths of time. Sometimes they last over a minute, sometimes they last only 20 seconds.
  - They do not get stronger when you move around.
  - These are all signs that you are still in the early stages of labour. Once they start to become more uniform in their frequency, strength and length this is a sign that you are moving into established labour.

Although still classed as the latent phase of labour, these contractions are doing a lot of hard work in getting your cervix ready for the active phase of labour. To save you coming into hospital too early, there are patterns of your contractions that indicate you might be in active labour that you can look out for:



***The cervix before labour:***

picture RelayHealth 2007 ©

- Your contractions are regular and coordinated; less than five minutes apart.
- They are always the same intensity: strong! Some women describe the contractions at this stage as 'taking their breath away'.
- They always last about 60 seconds.

"I got to the hospital when my contractions were coming every 3-4 minutes."

\*When your contractions are in this type of pattern, this is a good time to ring a midwife to get some advice about what to do next.

- 'Waters breaking' – Usually your 'waters break' during your labour, but for some women it can happen before labour starts. It might be that you notice that there is fluid trickling from your vagina, or it might be more obvious with a 'popping' sensation and a gush of fluid. Unlike when you pass urine, you will not be able to control this. The fluid is the amniotic fluid from around your baby, which is escaping because the membranes that have been holding the fluid in have opened.

It is a good idea to put on a maternity sanitary pad so that you or your midwife can assess whether it was your 'waters breaking' or something else. If it was your waters it is important to keep an eye on the colour of the fluid:

- It should be clear, pink or straw coloured, and odourless (although some women describe it as a 'metallic' smell).
- If the fluid is green or brown, or changes to this colour you should contact a midwife.
- If it smells like urine, it might be that the pressure of your baby's head on your bladder has caused some urine to leak out.
- Sometimes towards the end of your pregnancy there can be a lot of discharge from your vagina that makes your underwear feels damp or wet.

If you think that your waters have broken, put on a maternity sanitary pad and call the midwife for advice about what to do next. Most women whose waters break will go into labour in the next 24 hours.

## Coping with early labour

Here are some tips that other women have found helpful:

- Try to distract yourself – carry on with your usual activities, watch telly or your favourite film, go for a walk or chat with friends.
- Don't forget to eat and drink – it's important to keep your energy levels up!
- Have a bath – water can be very relaxing, the warmth can relieve the pain and soothe you.
- Keep yourself upright and mobile – it's a good way to encourage your baby into the best position for labour and to encourage your contractions.

"I had a bath, a nice warm bath. It really helped; I felt comforted."

- Try to rest – especially if feel tired, your contractions start at night or this stage of labour is long.
- Ask your birth partner to massage your lower back. Warmth can also be very soothing, so stand with your back against a warm radiator or use a warm ‘hot water bottle’.

“My contractions were getting quite tight and painful, so I tried the breathing techniques I learnt in one of my classes to try and keep the pain at bay – they really helped and I’m glad I learnt the breathing before labour...”

- Focus on deep breathing throughout the contractions.
- Use your TENS machine or other approved therapy such as aromatherapy or hypnotherapy.
- Paracetamol – can help ‘take the edge off’ your pains.

### When to contact a midwife

You should contact a midwife for advice about what to do next if:

- You are experiencing contractions in the pattern for active labour described above\*.
- If you think your waters have broken.
- If you are concerned about your baby’s movements.
- If you have any fresh bleeding from your vagina.
- If you are not coping with your pain.
- If you have any concerns, worries or questions, please call 0118 322 7304 and speak to the triage midwife, she will be able to help you.

This document can be made available in other languages and formats upon request.

Reviewed: February 2011, February 2013, January 2016, January 2018 (Consultant Midwife)

Approved: Maternity Information Group and Patient Information Manager, February 2020

Review date: February 2022