



Preterm Labor

Preventing a Premature Birth

A birth is considered preterm if it occurs before 37 weeks of pregnancy. The earlier the birth occurs, the more difficulty the baby may have breathing, maintaining the body temperature and eating. Premature babies often require special intensive care nursery services to support their physical needs.

Preterm Labor

Premature labor happens when regular often painful contractions of the uterus occur between 20 and 37 weeks gestation causing the cervix to soften and open earlier than normal. Preterm labor can occur in any pregnancy and may occur without the mother being aware that the uterus is contracting or tightening.

Warning Signs of Preterm Labor

Knowing the warning signs of preterm labor and notifying your health care provider early may help prevent a preterm birth:

- Menstrual-like cramps in the lower abdomen. They may come and go in a regular pattern or be constant.
- Low, dull backache that you feel below the waistline may come and go in a regular pattern or be constant.
- Pelvic pressure or intermittent pains in the lower abdomen that may come and go and may feel like a heaviness in the pelvis.
- Intestinal cramping with or without diarrhea.
- Increased or changed vaginal discharge that becomes mucous-like, watery, or blood-tinged.

Contractions

A contraction is a tightening of the uterus, which may be painless. Although you may feel occasional contractions during pregnancy, frequent contractions (more than 5-6 per hour) before 37 weeks gestation may be the start of preterm labor and should never be ignored.

Feeling and Counting Contractions

Place your hands on your abdomen, over your uterus, and feel for a tightening, then relaxing and softening of your uterus. The tightening should be felt over the entire uterus. Time the contractions from beginning of one contraction to the start of the next contraction.

If preterm labor is not clearly evident:

- Empty your bladder.
- Drink two or three glasses (8oz) of water.
- Lie down comfortably preferably on your left side.
- Place your fingers beneath the breast bone and feel the softer consistency of your upper abdomen. Feel downward until you come to the harder edge, the top of your uterus (the fundus).

- Place both hands on top of your uterus, and with your palms and fingertips feel for tightening or hardening of the uterus.
- Contractions can be mild or strong. With a mild contraction the uterus may feel like the tip of your nose, while a stronger contraction may feel like your forehead.
- Count and record how many contractions you have in one hour.

Braxton Hicks Contractions

Some women have “Braxton Hicks contractions.” These are contractions that happen several minutes apart. They are usually not too painful and don’t get stronger or more frequent over time. They often go away when you lie down or rest. Braxton Hicks contractions are sometimes called “false labor contractions.” That’s because they don’t really mean that you are going into labor.

When to call

- You have uterine contractions, pressure or cramping every 10 minutes or closer that continue for two hours, even though you have followed the previous directions.
- You have other warning signs of preterm labor that do not go away after one hour of rest.

References

The Vancouver Clinic. Patient Educational Materials. “24-28 Weeks”. Available at www.tvc.org

Uptodate. “Patient Information: Preterm Labor (The Basics)” Available at www.uptodate.org