



Preterm Labor

A normal pregnancy lasts between 38 and 42 weeks. Most pregnancies last around 40 weeks. Labor that starts before the 37th week of pregnancy is called **preterm labor**. Preterm labor that is not stopped results in a preterm birth. In the United States, 11 out of every 1,000 births are preterm.

Babies that are born too soon have low birth weights and less fully developed organs. These fragile "preemies" may have difficulty breathing, feeding, and staying warm. They may have vision, hearing, or walking problems. As they grow older, they may have trouble learning or have behavior problems. They also tend to grow more slowly than other children. Babies born at less than 29 weeks have the greatest risk for serious problems, such as cerebral palsy or mental retardation.

The causes of preterm labor are not fully understood. While certain risk factors have been identified, preterm labor can also happen in completely normal, healthy pregnancies.

The risk of preterm labor is increased for women who:

- Have had previous preterm births
- Are carrying two or more babies
- Have high blood pressure
- Smoke
- Have had no prenatal care
- Use illegal drugs
- Drink alcohol
- Have abnormalities of the cervix or uterus
- Have had many bladder or vaginal infections
- Are over age 40 or under age 18
- Have had one or more second trimester abortions
- Weigh less than 100 pounds
- Were exposed to DES (diethylstilbestrol) as a fetus (DES is a drug that was given to many pregnant women during the 1950's and 1960's.)

Preterm labor can often be stopped if the mother realizes what is happening soon enough. Only a medical provider can diagnose preterm labor. He or she must perform a pelvic exam to check your cervix for changes. Therefore, it is very important to know the signs of preterm labor and to call your doctor immediately if any of them occur. Postponing your baby's birth by even just few days can result in a healthier baby.

Signs of preterm labor:

- Menstrual- like cramps (constant or come and go; above the pubic bone)
- Low dull backache (constant or comes and goes)
- Pressure (feels like the baby is pushing down; feels heavy)
- Abdominal cramping (with or without diarrhea)
- Increase or change in vaginal discharge (mucousy, watery, light blood discharge)
- Fluid leaking from vagina
- Feeling bad
- Uterine contractions- that are 10 minutes apart or closer (may be painless), may feel like your baby is balling up inside of you

How to feel for contractions:

- When you are lying down, lay your fingers on top of your uterus
- A contracting uterus gets hard (tight) and then soft (relaxed)
- If your uterus is getting hard and then soft, write down the time the contraction starts, how long it lasts, and the time the next contraction begins.

Try to feel your uterus for contractions twice a day for half an hour at the same time every day.

If you have any signs of preterm labor:

- Lie down, on left side, for one hour. Many times the signs of preterm labor will go away.
- Drink 2-3 glasses of water or juice
- If signs do not go away in one hour, call your doctor.

If you have signs of preterm labor or at an increased risk of preterm labor your provider may suggest you do some or all of the following:

- Rest- Increase your rest time. Rest on your side at least twice a day, morning and afternoon. Your physician or nurse will tell you how long each rest period should be.

- Work or School- You may need to decrease, modify or stop work or school activities so that you can rest more. The type of job you have, the distance you travel to work or school and the course of your pregnancy are all important in the decision about how you should modify your schedule.
- Activities- You should eliminate heavy physical activities. STOP:
 - Sports
 - Frequent trips up and down stairs
 - Heavy lifting
 - Heavy cleaning
- Smoking- Smoking increases the risk of having a baby who is too small for age and may also increase the incidence of preterm birth. STOP SMOKING.
- Travel- Eliminate trips of more than one hour.
- Sexual Activity- Sexual intercourse may be limited or stopped.
- Breast Preparation- Preparation for breast feeding (nipple rolling, breast massage) must be delayed until the end of the 37th week.
- Childbirth Classes- Avoid physical exercised in childbirth classes. Some mothers at risk for preterm labor choose to attend classes earlier in pregnancy than usual.
- Weekly Check-Ups- Mothers at risk of preterm labor should visit their doctor weekly after 26 weeks of pregnancy. It is important to keep every appointment.

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