

GUIDE



Preparing for birth: Your guide to understanding labour



The Ottawa | L'Hôpital
Hospital d'Ottawa

Disclaimer

This is general information developed by The Ottawa Hospital. It is not intended to replace the advice of a qualified health-care provider. Please consult your own health-care provider who will be able to determine the appropriateness of the information for your specific situation.

As you get closer to your due date, your body begins to prepare itself for the work of labour.

Labour starts when your uterus begins to tighten and relax or contract. Your contractions will gradually become longer, stronger, closer together and more painful or intense as your labour progresses.

You may also notice you have:

- Back ache
- A change in your vaginal discharge
- Diarrhea and/or nausea and vomiting with contractions
- Leg cramps
- A feeling that something is happening.

Your contractions will help your baby to move down the birth canal (vagina) as your cervix begins to open (dilate) and shorten or thin (efface). The length of labour is different for every woman.

If this is your first baby, labour is usually longer than it would be for a second or later baby.

Early Labour

Early labour starts irregularly and can last for many hours. Your uterus and cervix are preparing for active labour and the birth of your baby. Contractions in early labour are generally 15 to 20 minutes apart and gradually become closer together. Sometimes they can be as close as every 2 to 3 minutes. They usually last about 30 seconds and can be described as “cramps”.

This stage of your labour can be uncomfortable, but the contractions are usually mild and easy to cope with. You will probably be able to keep talking and doing whatever you are doing during your contractions.

During **early labour** it is important for you to try and save your energy and get some rest. You should continue to eat light snacks and meals and drink to thirst. Labour is very hard work and if you become over tired in early labour, it may be harder for you to cope with active labour, when your contractions become longer, stronger and more frequent.

Active Labour

*You are considered to be in **active labour** when:*

- You are contracting every 3 to 5 minutes.
- Each contraction lasts about 50 to 60 seconds.
- Any show (blood tinged mucus) you may have changes from pink tinged to bloody.
- Your contractions are more painful.
- You find you need to stop what you are doing to concentrate on breathing through each contraction.
- You may have some trembling, hot and cold flashes, nausea, vomiting, irritability and/or mood swings.

This is all a normal part of labour. If this is your first baby you can expect this stage of your labour to last 12 to 14 hours.

At this point, you may want to go in to the Obstetrical Assessment Unit (OAU). It is important that the person(s) you have chosen to be with you during the birth of your baby comes with you. Along with your nurse, you will need their support and help during this important time of your life. You and your baby will benefit from a loving, welcoming place for your baby's birth.

Second Stage

Your cervix must open from being closed to 10 centimeters, or fully dilated. When you are fully dilated the first stage of your labour is over and the ***second stage*** of your labour begins. We expect your baby to be born within the next 4 hours.

Sometimes your contractions will slow down before you feel the urge to push. This is normal and is your body's way of preparing for the final work of labour.

At some point you will feel an urge to push or “bear down”. Pushing will help you give birth to your baby.

Tips:

Follow your instincts when you are trying to decide if you are in active labour or not.

For example:

- If this is not your first baby and you wake up with powerful contractions that come every 3 to 4 minutes but only last 30 seconds, you should go to the hospital to be assessed.
- If you have been having contractions that come every 5 minutes for the last 3 or 4 hours, but you can still do things during a contraction, you can stay at home a little longer.

It has been shown that women who have had a healthy pregnancy are better off staying at home as long as possible during early labour.

If you are not sure about what to do, call the OAU and speak with a nurse. She will be able to answer your questions and provide you with some guidance about what to do next.

If your water breaks you should call or go to the OAU to be checked.

If you start to bleed heavily (soak a pad), you feel an urge to push or you have any concerns about yours or your baby's wellbeing, go to the OAU right away.

Call 911 if necessary and follow their instructions.

When you arrive at the OAU, a nurse or doctor will do a vaginal examination to find out how you are progressing.

If your:

- Cervix is 3 to 4 centimeters dilated and thinning.
- Contractions are every 3 to 5 minutes, last 50 to 60 seconds and prevent you from doing anything else, you are considered to be in active labour and will be admitted to the Birthing Unit.

You will be assigned a nurse and she will guide you through your labour along with the help of your caregiver.

Sometimes the staff may ask you to wait or walk around for an hour or two and then re-examine your cervix to see if there have been any changes.

- If there are no changes you will be able to go home.
- If you are very tired, in pain or are having difficulty relaxing, but your cervix has not changed very much, your doctor may order some pain medication for you before you go home.

If you go home you can call back or go to the OAU at any time to be re-checked. The doctors and nurses are there to help and guide you during this important time of your life.

Remember:

- Every woman's experience of labour is different.
- There is no right or wrong way to go through labour.
- It is important for you to relax, drink to thirst, eat lightly and rest until you are ready to go to the hospital for your baby's birth.
- Talk to your baby. Let your baby know how excited you are about finally getting to meet them. It will comfort you and help you to relax.

Questions I would like to ask my health-care provider or nurse.

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When do I call or go to the Obstetrical Assessment Unit (OAU)?

If:

- Your contractions are lasting 50 to 60 seconds and are 3 to 5 minutes apart.
and/or
- You have to stop what you are doing and focus on breathing through your contractions.
and/or
- Your water's have broken.
and/or
- You are feeling pressure down low or have an urge to push.
and/or
- You are bleeding heavily from your vagina (soaking a pad).
and/or
- You are concerned about yours or your baby's health and well being.

Remember, if you have any doubts or questions; call your care provider or the Obstetrical Assessment Unit at:

The Ottawa Hospital

Civic Campus
613-761-5112

OR

General Campus
613-737-8012

My care provider:_____

Telephone number: _____

We look forward to participating in the birth of your baby.

