



# Preterm labor

Pregnancy is supposed to be 40 weeks long. You start counting from the first day of your last menstrual period. That gives the date your baby should be born. That's your "due date." Preterm labor is when your labor begins too soon. Three weeks or more before your due date is too soon. When you deliver your baby between week 32 and week 37, it's called preterm birth. Very preterm birth is when the baby is born before week 32.

## SYMPTOMS

(after 20 weeks)

- Contractions that:
  - Occur every 15 minutes or closer
  - Last from 20 seconds to 2 minutes each
  - Come closer together as time goes on
- Sudden gush of vaginal fluid (your water breaks)
- Change in vaginal discharge. This could be blood, water, or mucus.
- Pressure in your pelvis, back, or in the insides of your thighs. It feels like the baby is pushing down.
- A dull backache below your waist. This can come and go or you can feel it all the time.
- Cramps like you get with a menstrual period



## CAUSES

There are many risk factors for preterm labor. These include:

- Preterm delivery in the past
- Three or more miscarriages in a row
- Incompetent cervix. This means the cervix doesn't stay closed as it should until labor begins. It opens weeks or months before the pregnancy should end. It does this without pain.
- Placenta previa
- Pregnancy with more than one baby
- Uterus is not normal shape
- Fibroid uterus
- Mother is a daughter of a woman who took DES. That's a medicine used from 1940-1970. It was used mostly to prevent miscarriage. It was also given to pregnant women who had morning sickness.
- Infections of the urinary tract, vagina, or cervix
- Infections from STIs
- Mother had surgery on the cervix
- German measles (rubella)
- Hormone imbalance
- Mother's chronic illness (diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure)
- Too much or too little amniotic fluid
- Dehydration from flu or not drinking enough water
- Not enough weight gain, poor diet, lack of prenatal care
- Smoking
- Alcohol use
- Drug use
- Too much exercise or heavy physical work
- Mother is younger than 18 or older than 35



## PREVENTION

- If you have any risk factors in your medical history, tell your health care provider. Do this before you get pregnant.
- Lead a healthy lifestyle before and while you are pregnant.
  - Eat healthy foods. Drink 8 to 10 glasses of fluid every day.
  - Get moderate exercise.
  - Don't drink alcohol. Don't smoke. Don't use drugs.
  - Don't misuse medicines.
  - Get plenty of rest.
- Take the prenatal vitamins your health care provider prescribes.
- For women with an incompetent cervix, surgery can be done. Stitches are given to close the cervix until term. Then the stitches are removed. This needs to be done before the cervix starts to open.

## TREATMENT

Your health care provider can take tests to find out if you are at risk for preterm labor. Follow their advice. Treatment depends on the causes and the stage of the pregnancy. Some treatment options are:

- Rest. Laying on your left side is best. This could be complete bed rest.
- No sex or orgasm during last 2 or 3 months of pregnancy
- Drinking extra liquids. Sometimes fluid has to be given through an IV.
- Medications to slow labor.
- Hospital care. Medicine may be given to delay labor. Medicine may be given to help the baby's lungs mature sooner.
- Delivery of the baby.

## TRIAGE QUESTIONS



Do you have sudden vaginal bleeding or do you pass large clots of blood?

**NO**    **YES** ➔ **GET EMERGENCY MEDICAL CARE**



Do you have bright red bleeding from the vagina and severe pain in your abdomen?

**NO**    **YES** ➔ **GET EMERGENCY MEDICAL CARE**



Are you between weeks 20 and 36 of your pregnancy and do you have any signs of preterm labor?

- Contractions that: Occur every 15 minutes or closer (for 1 hour or more); last from 20 seconds to 2 minutes each; come closer together as time goes on.
- Sudden gush of vaginal fluid (your water breaks). Change in vaginal discharge. This discharge could be blood, water, or mucus.
- Pressure in your pelvis, back, or in the insides of your thighs. It feels like the baby is pushing down.
- A dull backache below your waist. This can come and go or you can feel it all the time. Cramps like you get with a menstrual period

**NO**    **YES** ➔ **CALL DOCTOR**



Are you more than 20 weeks into your pregnancy and do you have any of these signs with vaginal bleeding?

- Pain in the uterus and back. Sudden urine decrease.
- Throwing up. Severe headache.

**NO**    **YES** ➔ **CALL DOCTOR**



Do you have any of these symptoms of a urinary tract infection?

- Need to pass urine often – more so than usual, or passing urine often, in small amounts. Burning feeling when you pass urine. Strong smelling urine. Blood in the urine.
- Pelvic pain and/or low backache
- Fever

**NO**    **YES** ➔ **CALL DOCTOR**



**USE SELF-CARE**



## SELF-CARE

- Know the signs of preterm labor. That's labor that begins 3 weeks or more before your due date.
- If you have signs of preterm labor, call your health care provider. Follow his or her advice. You may be told to do these things:
  - Pass urine.
  - Drink 8 to 12 ounces of a clear liquid.
  - Pour 2 more glasses of a clear liquid. Take these with you for the next step.
  - Lie down tilted toward your left side. This aids blood circulation. Lie down for 1 hour. Don't lie on your back.
  - Time how long your contractions are and how often they occur in 1 hour. You can feel them by gently pressing down on your belly with your hands. When you have a contraction, you will feel your uterus or belly tighten and become hard. Then it relaxes and gets soft. Drink the 2 glasses of clear fluids during this hour.
  - Call your health care provider back. Give the provider the timing of your contractions.
- Know the signs of true labor and the signs of false labor.



SIGN	TRUE LABOR	FALSE LABOR
Contractions	Come in regular time patterns. Get closer together as time goes on such as every 15, then 10, then 5 minutes. Last longer as time goes on.	Do not come in regular time patterns. Do not get closer together as time goes on (called Braxton-Hicks contractions).
	Get stronger as time goes on. Stay the same or get stronger when you walk or move around.	Usually weak or may be strong and then get weak. Do not get stronger (or may stop) when you walk or move around.
Pain	Is usually felt in the lower back and moves around to the belly	Is usually felt in the lower part of your belly