

Your Body and Birth

Pain - Let's face it; no one likes it. But your body uses pain to tell you something. Sometimes pain can be positive and productive, like with childbirth. Each contraction becomes more intense and painful as you progress through labor. And then once your baby is born, the pain stops. You can do it!

Right now, your baby is snuggled in the fluid-filled amniotic sac inside your uterus—growing and developing and being nourished through the umbilical cord which is attached to the placenta. The top part of your uterus is called the *fundus*. The fundus will help push the baby out during labor. The part in which your baby is growing is the *uterine cavity*. And finally, the *cervix* is the lower, narrow part. It's the gateway between the uterine cavity and the vagina. For the moment, the cervix is tightly closed and sealed off by the mucus plug.

Signs of Labor - *Five Signs that Labor has or is about to begin:*

Lightening	Lose Mucus Plug	Water Breaking	Lower Back & Belly Pain	Labor Contractions
This is when your baby begins to drop lower and their head moves deeper into your pelvis. You might even be experiencing this right now. You may feel "lighter" because your baby isn't pressing on your diaphragm. This can happen anywhere from a few weeks to a few hours before labor begins.	If you start to notice a stringy, mucus discharge, this is a sign your cervix is opening or dilating, and the plug is being pushed out. You might see it as an increase of vaginal discharge that is clear, pink, or slightly bloody. It doesn't exactly mean that labor is beginning right away, but it does mean that your cervix is starting to open.	At some point you also may notice fluid leaking from your vagina. It could trickle or gush like you're peeing. But unlike pee, you won't be able to stop it. This means the amniotic sac has ruptured, and it's a definite sign of labor. If this happens, you should call your provider right away.	This could be a sign of early labor. This is pain that doesn't go away when you change positions, hydrate, or move around. It could indicate that you're beginning labor.	When you begin to feel consistent and regular contractions that don't go away after resting or hydrating, then you're likely beginning true labor. They'll follow a predictable pattern. And they'll become progressively closer together, last longer, and become stronger. At first, the contractions may feel like menstrual cramps or a lower backache. Each will start in the lower back and radiate to the front or vice versa.

When you notice contractions, begin timing them. To time the intervals, start your timer when a contraction begins and stop it when the next one begins. Also note how long each contraction lasts—that's the duration. *I bet you knew there was an app for that! A popular one that works on both iOS and Android is Full Term Contractions Timer.* When your contractions become regular and consistent, call your provider to let them know, and they will tell you when to head to the hospital or birthing center. A general guideline to follow is the 5-1-1 Rule. Head to the hospital when your contractions are **five** minutes apart, last about **one** minute long, and are in this pattern for **one** hour.

Recognizing Pre-term Labor: *Pre-term birth is birth before 37 weeks. Be aware of any contractions you feel. It can be hard to tell the difference between Braxton-Hicks and the real thing, especially as they become stronger. A good rule to follow is more than four contractions per hour is too many before 36 weeks, but after 36 weeks, more than four are okay. Let your provider know right away if you start feeling regular contractions or notice any of the other signs of labor earlier than 37 weeks.*

Stages of Labor: *You will go through four different stages of Labor*

Stage 1 - Contractions Begin: *The first stage of labor, which begins with uterine contractions, is most often the longest stage of labor. This stage is divided into three shorter sections called phases:*

1. **"Early" or "Latent" Phase,** this early phase can last approximately 8 to 12 hours and begins when your contractions start. In this phase, contractions are usually very light at about 20 minutes or more apart. They'll

gradually become closer together and get stronger. You can move around comfortably, walk, stretch, and even go back to bed. You'll want to relax and take your mind off the contractions to conserve energy.

2. **The Active Phase**, the second phase in the first stage of labor, can last from three to five hours. The contractions come closer together at about four or five minutes apart and can last up to 60 seconds. This is when you'll want to practice relaxation exercises to help get through the pain. Your provider may want you to head to the hospital at the start of this phase, if not sooner. Your cervix will dilate to around seven centimeters.
3. **The Transition Phase**, the final part of the first stage of labor, will be the most challenging and can last anywhere from 30 minutes to two hours. Your cervix will finish dilating to 10 centimeters and your contractions can last around 60 to 90 seconds long with a 30-second to two-minute rest in between. You may feel the urge to push before you're fully dilated. Your provider will indicate when it's time to start pushing once dilated to 10 centimeters.

Stage 2 - Pushing and Delivery: *Once you are through the three phases of the first stage of pregnancy, you are on to the second stage of labor.* This typically lasts from 20 minutes up to two hours. Your contractions will last between 45–90 seconds and are around three to five minutes apart. You'll push during contractions and rest between them. When the head reaches and stretches the opening of the vagina, you'll be directed to stop pushing. This is so you don't tear the tissues or increase your need for *an episiotomy*—an incision made to prevent tearing between the anus and vagina. Gentle pushing will allow this delicate tissue some time to stretch and give way for the baby. The burning or stinging will stop once the tissue naturally becomes numb from the baby's head pressing against nerves. You will need to make a conscious effort to relax and let the contractions do the work of moving the baby out. Once your baby is born, the cord is cut, and provided everything is normal, you can immediately have skin-to-skin contact and begin nursing if you want to.

Stage 3 - Expelling the Placenta: *This stage of labor happens after you deliver your baby. You will deliver the placenta, also called the afterbirth.* Lighter, less painful contractions will cause the placenta to separate from the uterus, and you will push it out.

Stage 4 - Postpartum Period: *After you have delivered the placenta, you'll be monitored to make sure your uterus continues to contract down, and your bleeding isn't excessive.* Your provider will do some things, such as massage the fundus, to help this happen. You will also be stitched up if you had an episiotomy or any tearing large enough to require stitches.

You can do this!

Giving birth is a big deal, but the great news is that labor and delivery is something that you can get through! Just remember, *contractions first*, which will help you to dilate, your cervix to thin, and your baby to move through the birth canal. Then, *pushing and delivery*, then the *afterbirth*, and finally, the *final fixes*.

1. <https://www.mynovabirth.com/motherbaby-blog/2016/2/1/the-contracting-power-of-the-uterus>
2. <https://www.acog.org/womens-health/faqs/how-to-tell-when-labor-begins>
3. <https://www.sutterhealth.org/health/labor-delivery/labor-contractions>
4. <https://www.lamaze.org/stages-of-labor>, By Judith A. Lothian, PhD, RN, LCCE, FACCE, and Kathryn McGrath, MW, LSW, CD(DONA), LCCE, FACCE
5. <https://www.acog.org/womens-health/faqs/preterm-labor-and-birth>
6. Dr. Eric Hazelrigg
7. <https://www.verywellfamily.com/stages-of-labor-2752957> The 4 Stages of Labor by Robin Elise Weiss, PhD, MPH and Brian Levine, MD, MS, FACOG
8. <https://www.verywellfamily.com/what-are-contractions-5081158> by Sara Lindberg, M.Ed, October 29, 2020.
9. <https://americanpregnancy.org/healthy-pregnancy/labor-and-birth/first-stage-of-labor-893/> William's Obstetrics Twenty-Second Ed. Cunningham, F. Gary, et al, Ch. 17. Pregnancy, Childbirth and the Newborn: The Complete Guide. Simkin, Penny, P.T., et al, Ch. 9.