

What to Expect During Labor

You've carried your baby for nine months. You've followed the growth of your baby through each exciting state of development. You've read everything you can to prepare yourself for the grand finale—labor. Labor is often perceived as a frightening event. Knowledge of what to expect often helps decrease anxiety and fear of this special process that leads to the birth of your baby.

Knowing when labor begins is often difficult for the new mother-to-be. This usually occurs within a few weeks of the estimated due date. Labor is the process where contractions (usually regular) are associated with cervical opening. Often irregular and painless contractions may occur days to weeks before the ultimate birth of your baby. If you are less than 37 weeks and you experience these changes, contact your provider. Preterm contractions are common and may need to be closely monitored. Actual preterm labor may require restrictions and/or medications to attempt to prolong the pregnancy. Other reasons to contact your provider or go to the hospital are: your water breaks even without contractions, you have severe pain, you have bright red or heavy bleeding (a blood-tinged mucous discharge is common), or your baby is moving less than you are used to.

It is not uncommon for a mom-to-be to arrive at the hospital thinking she is in true labor only to be told she is only slightly dilated. Sometimes the only way to tell for sure is to have a vaginal exam and check for leaking membranes or cervical change.

Once you are in true labor and your baby's birth is imminent, you will be monitored. Your vital signs will be evaluated for signs of infection and adequate blood flow to your baby. Your baby's well-being may be monitored with continuous electronic fetal monitoring or intermittent Doppler auscultation. Electronic fetal monitoring uses instruments on your abdomen to listen to and record the baby's heartbeat and monitor and record contractions. The type of monitoring depends on how you and your baby are doing and any health risks you may have. If needed, internal monitors are available for higher risk situations.

If you and your baby are healthy, you may move around and walk during labor. A tub or shower may be available for extra comfort. Once you are progressing and more uncomfortable, you may choose to have pain medication. Breathing and relaxation techniques help many moms cope with the discomforts of childbirth. You may not know how you will handle the pain of labor until you actually experience it. It is important to keep an open mind to all available options. Adequate pain relief may allow you to have more control over your labor and delivery process. Pain medication is available in the form of pills and injections. These injections may be given intramuscularly, intravenously, or into the spinal or epidural space. Discuss these options with your health care provider prior to labor to address any questions or concerns you may have. Various pain medications are better suited dependent on the stage of labor you are in.

There are three basic stages of labor. The first stage is usually the longest and is divided into early labor and active labor. This is when the cervix dilates to allow the head to progress out of the uterus. The second stage is the pushing stage. The third stage is delivery of the placenta.

Occasionally the labor process may need to be artificially started (induced) due to health concerns of the mother or baby. Some reasons include: reaching postdates (greater than 42 weeks pregnant), high blood pressure, infection, baby not continuing to grow, placental separation, water breaking prematurely, or other health concerns that may affect you or your baby's well-being. Methods of induction may include breaking your water or administering medication to cause ripening of the cervix and/or contractions.

Most women are able to have a vaginal delivery, but some may require assistance including a possible cesarean delivery. Some reasons for a cesarean delivery include: inability to progress in labor, abnormalities of the placenta, abnormal presentation of the baby, baby too large to come through the birth canal, concerns for the baby's well-being, or medical concerns for the mother.

This is actually an exciting time for you and your family. Having knowledge of what to expect can help you prepare for this very special time in your life. Your healthcare providers are eager to assist you each step of the way!