Preterm labour and birth

Who is more likely to go into preterm labour?
The reasons why women go into preterm labour are not completely understood, however, it is more likely if you have:
- had a previous preterm baby
- a urinary tract infection
- vaginal bleeding
- premature rupture of membranes (i.e. ‘waters breaking’ before 37 weeks of pregnancy)
- abnormalities with your uterus (e.g. fibroids)
- excessive amounts of amniotic fluid
- had no or very little antenatal care
- had surgery on your cervix
- a multiple pregnancy (e.g. twins, triplets)
- diarrhoea

Or you:
- smoke cigarettes
- are a substance user (e.g. cannabis, ICE)
- live in a stressful environment

What can be done to check if you are in preterm labour?
You will be examined by your health care provider and may be recommended to have:
- monitoring of your baby’s heart - usually with a cardiotocograph (CTG) machine
- observation and monitoring of your contractions
- a speculum examination to see if your cervix is opening and/or if your waters have broken

Your health care provider may also recommend some tests. These tests help identify if preterm birth is likely and may include:
- a fetal fibronectin test. This test is done by taking a swab from inside the vagina to test for a protein called fetal fibronectin. The presence of this protein is linked to preterm birth
- an ultrasound to measure the length of your cervix. This might be done by gently placing a probe, called a transducer into your vagina, or the transducer may be gently placed on your abdomen. If the measurement shows that your cervix has started to shorten this usually means you are more likely to have a preterm birth

What is preterm labour?
Preterm labour is when labour starts before the end of the 37th week of pregnancy. Sometimes preterm labour may start even when you are healthy and taking care of yourself during pregnancy.

What should you do if you think you are in preterm labour?
If you have any signs or symptoms of preterm labour it is very important to go to the hospital straight away or contact your health care provider immediately. Getting help quickly is the best thing you can do.

What are the signs & symptoms of preterm labour?
For some women, the signs and symptoms of preterm labour are obvious, while for others they are less clear. The signs and symptoms of preterm labour can include:
- contractions that make your abdominal muscles tighten up like a fist every 10 minutes or more often
- cramps that feel like your period
- low dull backache
- the feeling that your baby is pushing down, called pelvic pressure
- abdominal cramps with or without diarrhoea
- change in colour of your vaginal discharge
- general feeling that something is not right
- bleeding from your vagina
- your waters break (membranes rupture)

IMPORTANT: This is general information only. It is not intended as advice for your individual circumstances. Ask your health care provider for more information.
Can preterm labour be stopped?
If your preterm labour continues, there may be ways to stop or delay it. The management options will be discussed with you. These will be based on what is considered to be best for your health and your baby’s health. You may need to stay in hospital for continued observation and treatment.

The main approach to stopping or delaying preterm labour (for up to 48 hours) is by giving medication known as a tocolytic. Tocolytics can allow time for other care to be given to you and your baby and/or for you to be transferred to another hospital if this is required.

Are there other treatments?
Other treatments you might receive include:

**Corticosteroids**
Corticosteroids are drugs that help speed up the development of your baby’s lungs. Corticosteroids are recommended if you are less than 35 weeks pregnant and in preterm labour.

**Magnesium Sulfate**
Magnesium Sulfate may help reduce the chance of cerebral palsy that can be associated with preterm birth. It is given via a drip into your vein. Magnesium sulfate is a medication that is recommended if you:
- are between 24 weeks and 30 weeks pregnant
- are in established preterm labour
- have a strong chance of birthing within the next 24 hours

**Antibiotics**
Antibiotics are recommended if:
- it looks very likely you will give birth, or
- you have signs of an infection, or
- your membranes (waters) have broken

What happens if your preterm labour cannot be stopped?
If your preterm labour cannot be stopped, you may require transfer to a hospital that has specialist care if your baby is to be born early (prematurely). Most premature babies need specialist care in a special care nursery and/or a neonatal intensive care unit. If however your labour is progressing quickly and the hospital does not have specialist care, your baby may be transferred following the birth.

What happens if your preterm labour stops?
Around half of all women who have symptoms of preterm labour will have no changes to their cervix and their contractions stop without treatment. If your preterm labour stops completely, you may be able to return home. Sometimes it may be better to stay in hospital. The best option will depend on your individual situation and your health care provider will discuss this with you.

If you have comments about this parent information sheet please email guidelines@health.qld.gov.au

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**Comfort, support & information**
13HEALTH (13 432584) is a phone line that provides health information, referral and services to the public.

**Pregnancy, Birth & Baby Helpline**

**Australian Breastfeeding Association**
1800 mum2mum (1800 686 268) Provides counselling and breastfeeding information to any person seeking help. [www.breastfeeding.asn.au](http://www.breastfeeding.asn.au)

**Lifeline 13 11 14**
Lifeline offers a telephone crisis support service to anyone. [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

**Miracle Babies Foundation**
1300 MBABIES (1300 622 243) A not-for-profit support and information service for parent of sick and preterm babies. [www.miraclebabies.org.au](http://www.miraclebabies.org.au)

**Preterm Infants' Parents’ Association (PIPA)**
1300 PremParent (1300 773 672) is a support and information service providing understanding, practical and emotional support, encouragement and friendship to the parents and families of preterm infants. [www.pipa.org.au](http://www.pipa.org.au)

**beyondblue**
The national depression initiative 1300 22 4636. For general information on a range of mental health issues including, Antenatal and Postnatal Depression and Anxiety. [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)