

Early labour

This information sheet aims to answer some commonly asked questions about early labour.

IMPORTANT: This is general information only. Ask your doctor or midwife about what care is right for you.

Deciding if you are in labour can be hard sometimes. This information sheet will help you decide if your labour has started, how to cope in early labour and when you need to call or see your care provider.

What is early labour?

At the start of your labour you may experience mild contractions, lower back-ache or period-like cramps. Contractions are usually short (up to 30 seconds) and have no regular pattern. Some may be stronger than others. Contractions may go on for several hours or stop and start over a few days. This is normal. You may notice a 'show', (a mucousy blood-tinged vaginal discharge) when you wipe yourself or in your underwear. Early labour is an important part of getting your body ready for the birth of your baby but it can be tiring.



Woman and partner during early labour

Can you stay home in early labour?

It is safe to stay at home (and is usually recommended) during the early part of your labour as long as:

- You are well
- You haven't had any problems during your pregnancy
- You are between 37 and 42 weeks pregnant
- Your baby is in the head down position
- Your baby is moving normally

When should you go to hospital?

You should go to hospital if:

- You are having contractions before 37 weeks of pregnancy
- Your contractions are regular (at least 3 contractions in 10 minutes if this is your first labour), getting stronger and you feel the need to concentrate harder to get through each one
- Your waters break (or you think they might have broken)
- You have vaginal bleeding (other than a mucousy blood tinged show)
- You have a fever
- Your baby is not moving as much as usual
- You have pain that doesn't go away (contractions should stop and start with a rest in-between)
- You want advice, reassurance, or pain relief
- You feel something is wrong

When should you contact your hospital or care provider?

Always ring if you are worried about anything. Even if you are managing well at home contacting your hospital or care provider early-on can be reassuring. They can talk to you about:

- Coping in early labour
- Comfort measures
- A plan for when to come to hospital
- What is normal

If you do go to the hospital and are still in early labour, you may be encouraged to go home for a while. Don't be disheartened, this is all part of your birth journey. Remember early labour can be long, tiring and frustrating but is normal.

What can help during early labour?

It is important that you look after yourself during early labour.

Be positive

- Be around positive people. People who believe in you will be your best help during labour.
- Only tell your close support people that you are in early labour. Lots of calls and texts from friends asking if you have had your baby can make you worry about how your labour is going.
- Do what feels right. If you feel like walking the dog or doing the shopping, do it.
- Focus on your breathing rather than on timing your contractions.
- Eat and drink water as you want to. Remember to drink water because dehydration can slow labour.

Relax

Being relaxed increases your natural pain relief. You can try:

- Warm baths and showers
- Resting in a darkened room
- Relaxing music, dancing and swaying
- Watching a movie
- Massages, heat packs, foot rubs
- Different positions for example kneeling or rocking your hips
- Keep active, but rest when you feel like it.

How can your support people help in early labour?

Your birth supporters have a very important role in helping you to stay strong and positive and reducing fear and stress. Stress and fear hormones may slow or stop labour and can make contractions more painful.

Your support people can help by:

- Staying close and being attentive to you (for example offering you food and drink regularly, reminding you to empty your bladder and to try different positions)
- Helping you to relax with foot rubs, massages or heat packs, and creating a quiet space for you
- Turning phones off to avoid distractions and minimise calls and messages
- Encouraging you to focus on your baby

Support & Information

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

Pregnancy, Birth & Baby Helpline 1800 882 436 (free call) offers free, confidential, professional information and counselling for women, their partners and families relating to issues of conception, pregnancy, birthing and postnatal care www.health.gov.au/pregnancyhelpline

Lifeline 13 11 14 Lifeline offers a telephone crisis support service to anyone www.lifeline.org.au