



Quick Reference Guide To Preterm Labor

The following information will help you understand what preterm labor is and what to do if the signs of preterm labor occur. Knowing what to look for will allow you to alert your health care provider earlier about your preterm labor symptoms. Early attention to these symptoms will give you the best chance of keeping your baby from being born too soon. Babies born prematurely may have serious medical problems.

WHAT IS PRETERM LABOR?

- Labor that begins before 37 weeks of pregnancy

WHO HAS THE GREATEST RISK OF PRETERM LABOR?

- Previous preterm labor or delivery
- Current multiple pregnancy - twins, triplets, etc.
- Three or more abortions or miscarriages
- Abnormalities of the cervix, such as incompetent cervix or abnormalities of the uterus such as malformations or fibroids
- Severe kidney or urinary tract infections
- Acute infection in the mother
- Bleeding problems with the current pregnancy
- Abdominal surgery during the current pregnancy
- Maternal weight less than 100 pounds
- Patients who use tobacco or drugs

WHAT ARE THE WARNING SIGNS OF PRETERM LABOR?

- Contractions or a tightening or hardening feeling
- Menstrual like cramps
- Pelvic pressure or fullness in pelvic area, back or thighs
- Dull ache in the lower back
- Vaginal discharge (change in type or amount)
- Abdominal cramps with or without diarrhea
- A general feeling that something is “not quite right”

REMEMBER: PRETERM LABOR CONTRACTIONS ARE OFTEN PAINLESS

DETECTION OF PRETERM LABOR:

Early detection of the signs and symptoms of preterm labor may be the key factors in preventing a premature birth. Your health care provider may prescribe the use of self palpation alone for the detection of uterine activity, which may indicate the onset of preterm labor and the need for uterine monitoring services. It is important to become familiar with your normal uterine activity. Once you know what is normal for you, you will be able to focus on what is not normal.

PERFORMING SELF PALPATION

- Take time out twice a day, usually 1 hour in the morning and 1 hour in the evening to monitor your contractions by means of self palpation.
- Lie down with a pillow behind your back so you are tilted on your left side (TRY TO AVOID LYING ON YOUR BACK).
- Place your fingertips on your uterus; if your uterus is tightening and then relaxing, you can tell how often these contractions are occurring. “How often” is the time between the start of one tightening and the start of the next tightening.
- If you notice contractions while you are monitoring, turn on your left side and continue to monitor for an hour. If your contractions are occurring more than once every 15 minutes (4 or more per hour), you need to call your health care provider right away.

SOME TIPS ABOUT CONTRACTIONS

- When any muscle in your body contracts it becomes tight or hard to touch.
- When your uterus (which is a muscle) contracts you will feel it tighten or harden.
- When the contraction stops, your uterus becomes soft.
- It is normal for your uterus to contract at times during your pregnancy. This may happen when you first lie down, or after sex, or after you walk up and down stairs.
- It is not normal to have frequent or continuous uterine contractions before your baby is due.

WHAT IS NORMAL?

- Contractions - three or less per hour
- Backaches as your baby grows and causes your posture to alter
- Pressure as your baby grows and presses on your pubic bone and legs
- Pulling and stretching of muscles that may cause pain in a specific area.

WHAT IS NOT NORMAL?

- Regular uterine contractions or tightening, 4 or more per hour
- Rhythmic lower abdominal cramping
- A low, dull backache that feels different from what you normally experience
- Persistent diarrhea or intestinal cramps
- An unusual rhythmic or persistent pelvic pressure
- A large amount of mucus or water leaking from the vagina
- A change in color of vaginal discharge to pink or brown