

Maternity information factsheet

What to expect in the early stage of labour

This factsheet contains information about what to expect and how to look after yourself during the early stage of labour. It also gives information about the maternity triage line, a dedicated 24-hour support service. You can contact the maternity triage line for advice or support if you think you are going into labour.

The early (latent) stage of labour

Everyone's experience of labour is different. It is important to remember that it is a normal process. The early stage of labour prepares your uterus (womb), baby and cervix (neck of your womb) for birth. This may take hours or even days. It may stop altogether and start again later or another day. It's important to think about how you are going to look after yourself during early labour, and make plans for somebody to support you during this time. Staying within the comfort of your own home until your labour is established can increase your chances of a normal birth.

Waters breaking

Your unborn baby develops and grows inside a bag of fluid called the amniotic sac. When it's time for your baby to be born, the sac breaks and the amniotic fluid drains out through your vagina. This is known as 'your waters breaking' and usually occurs during labour, but it can sometimes happen before labour starts.

When your waters break, you may feel a slow trickle or a sudden gush of water that you cannot control. Amniotic fluid is a pale straw colour, so it is sometimes difficult to tell amniotic fluid from urine. To prepare for this, you could keep a sanitary towel (but not a tampon) to hand if you are going out and put a protective sheet on your bed from 36 weeks of pregnancy.

Once your waters have broken, your baby is no longer protected from infection travelling upwards from your vagina. Therefore, if your waters break before labour starts, contact the maternity triage line for advice. It is safe for you to have a bath or shower after your waters have broken, but we advise you to avoid sexual intercourse as this can introduce infection.

Most women go into labour within 24 hours of their waters breaking. This is because the waters contain stimulating hormones and your baby presses more firmly on your cervix (neck of your womb) when the cushioning waters are no longer there.

Contractions

At first, your contractions will last for less than a minute and will be at least seven to ten minutes apart. As time goes on, your contractions will get longer, stronger and closer together. You may feel the contractions at the front of your bump, in your back or at the top of your legs.

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When you have contractions:

- your cervix (neck of your womb) moves from the back to the front of your baby's head.
- your cervix softens and thins, getting ready to open (dilate).
- you may lose your mucus plug (also known as a 'show') from your cervix (this is often thick and sticky and may have a streak of blood in it).
- your cervix may begin to dilate, opening anywhere from one to four centimeters.
- your baby is encouraged to move downwards within your pelvis.

Looking after yourself during early labour

Support

Having a birthing partner present can have a calm and reassuring effect on your labour. Your birth partner may be your partner, a close family member or a friend. Some women also choose a doula. Further information about doulas is available from your midwife or via the websites listed at the end of this factsheet. It is important to discuss your plans and preferences for birth with your birth partner as well as your midwife during your pregnancy, as this will enable them to support you practically as well as emotionally.

Environment

Create an environment which is comfortable for you, ensuring the temperature is not too warm or too cold. You may wish to dim the lights or use battery operated candles or fairy lights to create softer lighting and/or choose a selection of music which you find soothing.

Rest and exercise

Vary your periods of exercise with periods of rest. Remaining upright and mobile is beneficial in labour, especially if your contractions occur less often or are not as strong when you rest. You are advised to explore the use of birthing aids (for example, birthing balls), techniques (rocking, swaying and wriggling your hips) and upright positions, as these can help during labour. Further information is available from your midwife or via the websites listed at the end of this factsheet.

Eating and drinking

- It can help to eat during the early stage of labour (when you're more likely to feel hungry), as this will provide you with plenty of energy later in labour, when your contractions become longer, stronger and closer together.
- Eat whatever appeals to you to maintain your energy levels. Carbohydrates, such as bananas, sandwiches, cereal and cereal bars, pasta, crackers and toast, are easily digested and give a slow release of energy. This will help you through contractions. Sugary foods will offer you a quick energy boost, but this may be short-lived and leave you feeling tired. It's better to avoid foods which are high in fat as these can make you feel nauseous (sick).
- Food takes longer to digest during labour, so eating little and often is advisable.
- Drinking plenty of fluids, especially water, juices and sports (isotonic) drinks, is essential. You are advised to take small sips regularly. Isotonic drinks are particularly beneficial if you don't feel like eating because they can help keep your energy levels up.
- Go to the toilet regularly. Keeping your bladder empty will protect it, as well as allowing your uterus (womb) to contract more efficiently. An empty bladder also allows your baby more room to move down through your birth canal and ensures you remain more comfortable.

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Distraction and relaxation

- You may find that listening to music or watching TV are useful distractions.
- Try relaxing in a warm bath or having a shower. For more information on the benefits of water in labour, please speak to your midwife.
- Focus on your breathing during your contractions. As you become aware of a contraction, breathe out slowly as if you are sighing. Then, as the sensation builds, continue to blow away the pain by making your 'out-breaths' as long as possible. As you blow out, relax your body as much as possible.
- You may find specific hypnobirthing, massage, relaxation or visualisation techniques helpful, and are advised to practise these during pregnancy. Please speak to your midwife or browse the websites listed at the end of this factsheet for more information.

Additional pain relief

- If your contractions are becoming uncomfortable, try using a TENS machine. Remember to take this off if you have a bath or are using a birthing pool.
- Paracetamol is good for labour pains and you can take 1g (2x 500mg tablets) four times in 24 hours, as per the instructions on the box, if needed.

Maternity triage line

Maternity triage line midwives are available to listen to you as your labour starts to establish, offering you support and encouragement together with practical tips and suggestions.

To contact the maternity triage line midwives:

- telephone the maternity triage line on **0300 123 9001**, or
- download the NHS Healthier Together app from the Apple app store or the Google Play store

Contact the maternity triage line if:

- you think you might be in labour
- you think your waters may have broken and would like further advice or support
- you are ready to transfer from home to your chosen place of birth

Maternity triage line midwives can make arrangements to call you back or for a midwife to visit you at home, if appropriate.

Concerns

Contact the maternity triage line immediately if:

- your baby's movements are reduced
- you have any bleeding from your vagina
- you feel unwell or feverish
- your waters have broken and have an offensive smell or are brown or green in colour

You may need to be seen by a midwife or an obstetrician straight away.

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Useful links

NHS

www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/labour-signs-what-happens

National Childbirth Trust (NCT)

www.nct.org.uk/labour-birth/your-guide-labour/early-signs-labour

www.nct.org.uk/pregnancy/what-doula

Healthier Together

www.what0-18.nhs.uk

UHS maternity services

www.uhs.nhs.uk/departments/maternity-services/maternity-services-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/online-education

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