

## Patient information factsheet

# What to expect in the early stage of labour

**This factsheet has been designed to give you information about what to expect and how to look after yourself during the early stage of labour. It also gives information about Labour Line, a dedicated 24-hour telephone support service that you can contact on 0300 123 9001 for advice or support if you think you are going into labour.**

### The early (latent) stage of labour

Every woman's experience of labour is different. It is important to remember that it is a normal process. The early stage of labour prepares the uterus (womb), baby and cervix (neck of the 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. Most women's waters break during labour, but it can also 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 and it is sometimes difficult to tell amniotic fluid from urine. To prepare for this, you could keep a sanitary towel (but not a tampon) in your handbag 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 the vagina. Therefore, if your waters break before labour starts, phone **Labour Line** on **0300 123 9001** for advice. It is still safe to have a bath or shower after your waters have broken though you are advised 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 womb) when the cushioning waters are no longer there.

### Contractions

At first the contractions last for less than a minute and are at least seven to ten minutes apart. As time goes on the 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.

When you have contractions:

- The cervix (neck of the womb) is moving from the back to the front of baby's head.
- The cervix is softening and thinning, getting ready to open (dilate).

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- You may lose your mucous plug (show) from the 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 (see useful link below). 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/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; however, if the contractions occur less often or are not as strong when you rest, then it is important to do so. You are advised to explore the use of birthing aids (for example birthing balls), techniques (rocking, swaying, wriggling your hips) and upright positions which are helpful during labour. Further information is available from your midwife or via the websites listed at the end of this factsheet.

## Eating and drinking

- Eating will be of benefit to you during the early stages of labour (when you're more likely to feel hungry) as well as later in labour, providing you with plenty of energy when the contractions become longer, stronger and closer together.
- Eat whatever appeals to you to maintain your energy levels - carbohydrates such as bananas, sandwiches, cereal/cereal bars, pasta, crackers or 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.
- 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 for descent through your birth canal and ensures you remain more comfortable.

## Distraction and relaxation

- You may find listening to music or watching TV useful distractions.
- Try relaxing in a warm bath or having a shower. For more information on the benefits of water please read the factsheet entitled 'The Use of water for labour and birth'.
- Focus on your breathing during 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. You may wish to speak to your midwife, attend the 'Helping yourself to a normal birth' workshop or browse the websites listed at the end of this factsheet for more information.

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## Additional pain relief

- If the 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, if needed.

## Labour Line

Labour 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. Labour Line midwives can make arrangements to call you back or for a midwife to visit you at home, if appropriate.

Call Labour Line on **0300 123 9001** and speak to a midwife 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

## Concerns

**Phone Labour Line on 0300 123 9001 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 obstetrician straight away.**

## Sources of further information

### Helping yourself to a normal birth workshop

This one-off interactive workshop covers:

- advantages of normal birth for you and your baby
- early labour - what to expect and managing at home
- coping mechanisms for you and your partner
- birth rooms, pools and aids - discover how women being upright and mobile can lead to a more straightforward birth

Sessions run monthly at the New Forest Birth Centre, Ashurst, from 7 to 9pm.

Please telephone Maternity Information and Support Service on 023 8120 6052 or the New Forest Birth Centre 023 8074 7690 for the next available date and to book a place.

## Useful links

NHS Choices

Signs that labour has begun [www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/pages/labour-signs-whathappens.aspx#close](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/pages/labour-signs-whathappens.aspx#close)

Preparing for birth video [www.nhs.uk/Video/Pages/preparing-for-birth.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Video/Pages/preparing-for-birth.aspx)

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NCT - National Childbirth Trust

Birth partners

[www.nct.org.uk/birth-topics/birth-partners](http://www.nct.org.uk/birth-topics/birth-partners)

What is a doula?

[www.nct.org.uk/pregnancy/what-doula](http://www.nct.org.uk/pregnancy/what-doula)

Babycentre

How do contractions really feel?

[www.babycentre.co.uk/a25010383/how-do-contractions-really-feel](http://www.babycentre.co.uk/a25010383/how-do-contractions-really-feel)

**If you need a translation of this document, an interpreter or a version in large print, Braille or on audio tape, please telephone 023 8120 4688 for help.**