

Premature Labor

What is Premature Labor?

Premature labor is labor that begins more than 3 weeks before your due date. Uterine contractions cause the cervix to open earlier than normal, and can result in the birth of a premature baby. Babies who are born more than 3 weeks early can have serious problems with breathing, eating, and keeping warm. The key to preventing a preterm birth is getting help early. By knowing the warning signs of premature labor, you can do this. You and your doctor, working together, may be able to prevent your baby from being born too soon.

What Causes Premature Labor?

Premature labor can happen to any pregnant woman. There are a number of things that can cause it, but the doctors can only tell the cause in about half of the cases.

What are the Warning Signs of Premature Labor?

1. Uterine contractions that happen every 15 minutes or more often.

When your uterus contracts, it feels tight or hard to touch. Ask your doctor or nurse to help you feel a contraction. When the contraction stops, your uterus becomes soft. Contractions may be painless; they may feel like mild cramps; or they can be painful. Remember, it is normal for your uterus to contract at times during your pregnancy. This may happen when you first lie down, after sex, or after walking up and down stairs. Contractions that are more than 4 in an hour or occur more often than every 15 minutes are considered abnormal.

2. Menstrual-like cramps which occur in the lower abdomen.

These may come and go or be constant and steady.

3. A low, dull backache felt below the waistline.

It is especially important if it does not go away when you change position to try to get comfortable.

4. Pelvic pressure.

It may feel as if the baby is pushing down or about to "fall out."

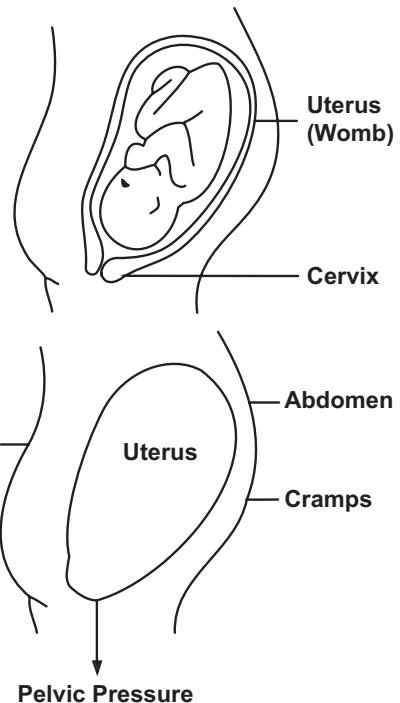
5. Abdominal cramping or a feeling like "gas pains" – with or without diarrhea.

6. Discharge from your vagina may increase in amount, or change color to pink or brown or bloody.

If your discharge turns watery, your membranes or "bag of water" may be leaking.

7. Feelings that things are "not right" can be reason enough to call your nurse or doctor.

****It is very important to let your nurse or doctor know immediately if you have any of these symptoms. Don't worry about calling your nurse or doctor too often. They would rather check you out for a "false alarm" than deliver a premature baby. The sooner you tell them, the better chance they have of stopping premature labor, and the better the chance your baby has of being born healthy. ****



This information has been reviewed and recommended for use by the UAMS/CPED/Patient Education Advisory Committee.

What Will My Doctor Do if I Have Signs of Premature Labor?

The diagnosis of premature labor is not always easy. Contractions, by themselves, do not always mean that you are in premature labor. If you are having regular contractions but your cervix shows no changes, your doctor may still want you to stay in the hospital for a while so you and your baby can be closely watched and you can have lots of bed rest. Resting on your left side is best. If it is true labor, the cervix (the mouth of your womb) will begin to thin out and dilate (open up), or soften. Your doctor or nurse will perform a vaginal exam to check for this. If your cervix shows changes that go along with labor, you may have an IV put in your arm so that you can be given fluids and medicine. A special electronic fetal monitor will be placed on your abdomen to more closely watch your contractions and the baby's heart beat. Several medicines may be used to try and stop premature labor. Again, these medications work best when used early. Your doctor may use magnesium sulfate (MAG), or other medications. These drugs may be given in your IV, a shot or as a pill. These drugs can sometimes make your heart beat fast and may make you feel nervous or shaky. Your doctor may also use a heart (EKG) monitor to keep up with your heart rate. After several hours of treatment, your cervix will be re-examined to see if the medication is working and whether or not your labor has stopped. If your labor has stopped, you will need to stay in the hospital for a few days to make sure it does not start again. If your premature labor has stopped, your doctor may decide to let you go home. You will be given instructions on when and how to take any medication your doctor prescribes.

What About My Delivery?

It is safest to deliver your baby no earlier than 3 weeks before your due date. As you get close to your due date, usually around 37 weeks, your doctor may perform an amniocentesis. For this test they withdraw fluid from around the baby and send it to the lab for testing. This testing will tell the doctor if the baby's lungs are developed enough to breathe without a respirator or extra oxygen. If the test is positive, your doctor will go ahead with plans for your delivery.

Waiting on your baby to mature may be very difficult, especially if you must stay in the hospital. It is especially hard to stay in the hospital when you don't feel sick. The nurses and doctors will help in any way to make your wait easier. Visits and phone calls from family, friends, and church members may help with the long days. Try to remember that you are doing everything you can to have a healthy, full term baby.

If the doctors are unable to stop your premature labor, you may still be able to deliver normally. A Cesarean section may be necessary if your baby is breech (feet first) or heart rate problems show up on the monitor.

What if My Baby is Born Prematurely?

A baby born too early can have many problems with breathing, eating, and keeping warm. The number and severity of these problems depends on how premature the baby is at birth. The baby that is premature may face a long hospital stay until he or she is mature enough to go home. This care is very expensive and not as good for the baby as staying inside mom. Even with the best medical care, not all premature babies will survive. This is why it is so important to stop premature labor as early as possible.

What About Future Pregnancies?

When you are considering another pregnancy, visit your doctor to discuss what you can do beforehand to reduce your chances of having a premature birth. When you find out you are pregnant the next time, it is very important to remind your doctor that you had premature labor with your last baby. Together, you can watch for early signs of premature labor. Not all women who have had a premature baby with the last pregnancy will have a premature baby with the following pregnancy, but it does increase the chances.

Arkansas High Risk Pregnancy Program – UAMS

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