

Recognizing Preterm Labor

A term pregnancy takes about 40 weeks to complete. Babies born before 37 weeks may have problems breathing, eating, and keeping warm. Premature labor occurs between the 20th and 37th week of pregnancy. It is a condition where uterine contractions, or tightening of the womb, cause the cervix (the mouth of the womb) to open earlier than normal. This early cervical dilation can result in premature birth.

Certain factors may increase a woman's chances of having premature labor, such as carrying twins. However, the specific cause or causes of premature labor are not known. Sometimes a woman may have premature labor for no apparent reason.

It may be possible to prevent a premature birth by knowing the warning signs of premature labor and by seeking care early if these signs occur.

Warning signs and symptoms for premature labor include:

- Uterine contractions that happen four to six (or more) times in an hour
- Menstrual-like cramps felt in the lower abdomen that may come and go or be constant
- Low dull backache felt below the waistline that may come and go or be constant
- Pelvic pressure that feels like your baby is pushing down. This pressure comes and goes.
- Abdominal cramping with or without diarrhea
- Increase or change in vaginal discharge such as change into a mucousy, watery, or bloody discharge

Uterine Contractions

It is normal to have some uterine contractions throughout the day. They often occur when you change positions, such as from sitting to lying down. It is *not* normal to have frequent uterine contractions, such as four to six (or more) in one hour, because frequent uterine contractions may cause your cervix to begin to open.

Since the onset of premature labor is very subtle and often hard to recognize, it is important to know how to feel your abdomen for uterine contractions. You can feel for contractions in this way:

- While lying down, place your fingertips on the top of your uterus
- A contraction is a periodic tightening or hardening of your uterus. If your uterus is contracting, you will actually feel your abdomen get tight or hard, and then feel it relax or soften when the contraction is over.
- Premature contractions may or may not be painful.

What To Do

If you think you are having uterine contractions or any other signs and symptoms of premature labor:

1. Lie down tilted towards your side. Place a pillow at your back for support.
 - Sometimes lying down for an hour may slow down or stop your symptoms.
 - Do not lie flat on your back because lying flat may cause the contractions to occur more often.
 - Do not turn completely on your side because then you may not be able to feel the contractions.
2. Hydrate yourself by drinking several large glasses of water. Sometimes being dehydrated can cause contractions.
3. Sometimes a warm bath can relax your muscles and help stop or slow down contractions.
4. Check for contractions for one hour.
 - To tell how often contractions are occurring, count the number of minutes from the beginning of one contraction to the beginning of the next.
5. Call the nurses triage line or answering service at 843-6168 *if* you experience any of the following:
 - You have four to six or more uterine contractions in one hour
 - You have any of the other signs and symptoms for one hour
 - You have any spotting of blood or leaking of fluid from your vagina