

Preterm Labour

What is preterm labour?

A normal or *term* pregnancy lasts 37 to 42 weeks. Preterm labour is labour that starts before 37 weeks of pregnancy. Labour is a process that happens at the end of the pregnancy. In labour, there are contractions (tightening) of the uterus (womb) which cause the cervix (opening to the womb) to open.

Could this happen to me?

Yes, preterm labour can happen to anyone.

Even if you are healthy and do “all the right things”, there is still a chance that preterm labour can happen to you. Medical experts do not know all the reasons why labour starts too early.

Some women may be more likely than others to have a preterm birth.

These are women who:

- ❖ are having their first baby
- ❖ have had a preterm baby before
- ❖ are carrying more than one baby (twins)
- ❖ are smokers
- ❖ are underweight
- ❖ are not getting enough healthy food
- ❖ have a lot of stress in their life
- ❖ have a vaginal or bladder infection
- ❖ have had a previous abortion

What does this mean for my baby?

Preterm labour may lead to a preterm birth (your baby being born too soon).

Preterm babies **may**

- ❖ have trouble breathing, feeding, and keeping warm
- ❖ be more likely to get infection
- ❖ need special care in the hospital
- ❖ have to stay in the hospital after mother goes home

The earlier your baby is born preterm, the more likely he or she will be to have long term health problems such as:

- ❖ blindness
- ❖ difficulty walking
- ❖ learning difficulties

Some preterm babies are very small and may not be strong enough to live.

What happens if I am in preterm labour?

The midwife will check to see how much the labour has advanced.

If there are no changes or only very small changes in the cervix,

- ❖ You will probably get to go home and rest.
- ❖ Your midwife will want to see you again soon after.

If your cervix has started to open or shorten and the midwife thinks that you might give birth soon, you will be admitted to the hospital for treatment. You may have to be transferred to a hospital that provides special care for preterm babies.

If you are less than 34 weeks pregnant you will probably receive two doses of a medication to help your baby's lungs to mature. This medication works best if it is in your body for 48 hours, so you may also receive another medication to delay or stop the labour for this amount of time.

After this second medication,

- ❖ Your body may delay labour on its own for a few weeks.
- ❖ It is also possible that the labour will only be delayed for a short time and that your baby will be born early.

What can I do to reduce the chances of preterm labour?

Although it is not possible to prevent all preterm labours from happening, **there is still much you can do to help your baby to be born at the right time:**

- ❖ Start seeing your midwife as early as possible in pregnancy.
- ❖ Go to prenatal classes early in your pregnancy.
- ❖ If you smoke, try to quit or at least cut down.
- ❖ Take time to lie down or put your feet up during the day.
- ❖ Follow Canada's Food Guide for Healthy Eating.
- ❖ Listen to your body – notice when things feel “different” and talk to your midwife about it.
- ❖ Talk to your midwife about how to deal with the stress in your life.
- ❖ Learn everything you can about preterm labour.
- ❖ Ask your midwife questions
- ❖ Keep these notes handy

How do I know if I am having preterm labour?

It is not always easy for a woman to tell if she is having preterm labour. Many of the signs of preterm labour can feel the same as some of the normal things that happen in the second half of pregnancy. The important signs to watch for, especially if they are *new* or *different* from before are:

- ❖ **A sudden gush or a constant slow leak of fluid from the vagina**
- ❖ **Bleeding from the vagina**
- ❖ **Contractions of the uterus**

Or a change in what you normally feel in:

- ❖ **Low dull backache**
- ❖ **Pelvic pressure** – a heavy or full sensation
- ❖ **Discharge from the vagina**

Some women may just feel that “something is not right”.

A word about contractions:

Preterm labour contractions feel different from the normal tightening that many women feel in the second half of pregnancy.

- ❖ They **may feel more regular**.
- ❖ They **do not go away** if you move around or lie down.
- ❖ **There may be other signs** that happen with the contractions, such as fluid leaking from the vagina or pelvic pressure.

What should I do if I think I am in preterm labour?

If you have any of the signs of preterm labour,

DON'T WAIT – REACT

1. **PAGE your Midwife** – your midwife will stay on the telephone with you.
2. **Call EMS** – Use number on the Ambulance form (**1-800-265-2136 OR 653-2154**).
3. **Have mom lie down for delivery** – i.e., **not on toilet or standing up**.