

There are three stages of labour

- the first stage, when the cervix (neck of the womb) opens to 10 centimetres
- the second stage, when the baby moves down through the vagina and is born
- the third stage when the placenta (afterbirth) is delivered.

‘Braxton Hicks’ contractions can occur throughout pregnancy. These are tightening of the uterus and are usually painless. During the latent phase Braxton Hicks may become more noticeable and more frequent, lasting 35-45 seconds. However some women may not notice anything happening at all.

What is the latent phase or early labour?

The latent phase of labour is the very first part of your labour, the early part of the first stage

Before labour starts the cervix is long, situated towards the back of your pelvis, firm and closed.

During the latent phase the muscles of the uterus (womb) contract and make the cervix become thinner and softer. This is called effacement or thinning. During the latent phase the cervix thins out and opens up to 3-4cm.

The next part of labour is called the active phase, when labour has become established. Midwives may refer to this as established labour.

Both the latent and the active phase are part of the first stage of labour.

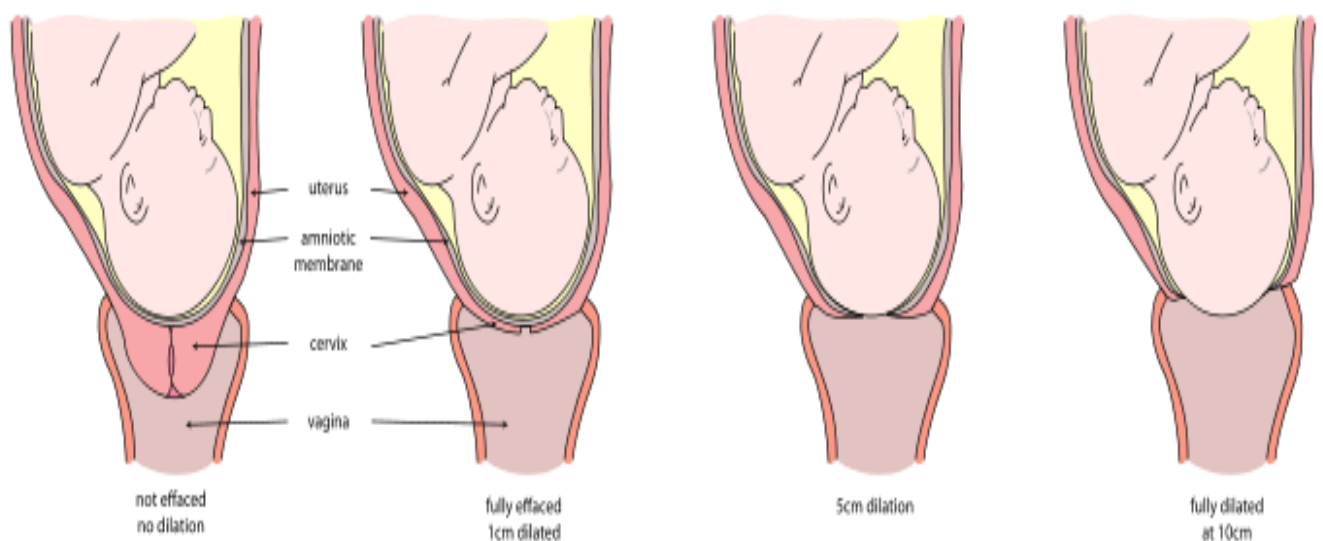
At the end of the first stage, the cervix will have opened to 10cm and is known as being fully dilated.

The latent phase can last several days or weeks before active labour starts. Some women can feel backache or lower period type pain cramps. The pains can be irregular with no particular pattern to them, and it is quite common for the pains to last for a few hours and then stop altogether. Contractions may continue for several hours, but not become stronger or longer. This is normal.

A 'start-stop' pattern of contractions is common in the latent phase. Remember! The latent phase of labour can last a very long time, especially for first time mums.

Once you are in the active phase of labour, your contractions will be regular and continue until your baby is born. Your contractions will get stronger, longer and closer together.

Many women are unsure of when the active part of labour has begun, and may wish to attend triage to be assessed and to be informed of progress in labour. If you are still in the latent phase (if your cervix is less than 4cm dilated and not fully effaced) you will be advised to return home and wait for the contractions to become longer, stronger and closer together. Most women will be more comfortable at home in the latent phase. There is evidence to suggest the longer you stay at home the more likely you are to have a normal birth. This leaflet should help you find ways to cope with this.



What can I do in the latent phase of labour?

It is not possible to say when active labour will begin. It could start in a couple of hours, or several days, so try to stay as relaxed as you can, and distract yourself from focussing only on the contractions. There are things you can do to distract yourself, such as,

- pottering around the house
- taking a walk
- watching a DVD
- taking a warm bath, putting a bath towel in the water with you to cover your tummy and keep it warm
- using a hot water bottle on any areas that ache such as your back, tummy, under your bump, or between your thighs
- having a nap
- doing some relaxation
- massage
- keep your breathing quiet and relaxed, breath in gently, and sigh out slowly
- keep as mobile as you can, while remembering to rest when needed to save energy for active labour
- try out different positions to become comfortable such as
standing, squatting, kneeling using pillows, bean bags and birthing balls

- drink plenty of fluids; water, sports drinks and juice are good
- eat little and often, carbohydrates (bread pasta, rice and cereal) for slow release of energy, plus sugary foods, such as sweets or glucose tablets for quick release energy
- listening to calming and relaxing music
- You can safely take paracetamol or co-codamol 6 hourly within the recommended dose.
- You may find it helps to have sex. This causes your body to produce oxytocin, this is a hormone which is also produced in labour and which makes the uterus contract.
- TENS machines can be used in the latent phase.

Your birth partner can help with the latent phase with things such as

- massage
- keeping you active
- getting you drinks
- praising and encouraging
- giving you cuddles
- Keeping you company and distracting you from focussing on the pain.

You can help your labour to carry on smoothly by avoiding stimulating the 'rational' part of your brain. You need peace, quiet, and a feeling of safety to help you relax and so increase the levels of your own natural pain relievers called endorphins.

During labour you can take measures such as avoiding;

- bright lights
- people asking you questions which you have to think to answer
- people talking to you during contractions
- feeling as if people are watching you or judging you.

If your waters break before labour

- during pregnancy, your baby is surrounded by amniotic fluid (the waters)
- before active labour starts, your waters may break
- for some women the first sign that labour is going to start is that the waters begin to leak
- It is quite common for women to leak a small amount of urine at the end of pregnancy and it can be difficult to tell if your waters have broken or if it is urine
- If you are not sure if your waters have broken, put a sanitary towel on and lie down for about 30 minutes. If you have a definite gush when you stand up, it is a clear sign that your waters have broken and you should telephone triage.
- If not, then you can assume your waters have not broken.
- It is advisable once you think your waters have broken to contact triage to be informed of what happens next.

- If your water is any colour other than clear you must contact triage immediately.
- It can be common for your waters to break and for you not to go into labour, if this happens you will be assessed in triage and sent home, and advised to return 24 hours after your waters have broken to have labour induced.

The 'show'

The show is a mucous plug that sits in the cervix during pregnancy, as the cervix begins to soften and shorten, the show can come away.

It can be clear mucus, lightly coloured with blood or quite heavily stained with blood. Any form of the show is normal, and individual to each woman. As long as this is mucousy, thick and sticky in appearance you do not have to inform triage until you have any further signs of labour.

If you experience what you think may be labour before 37 weeks, you must contact triage for advice.

Things you can do to help yourself before labour starts

Remember your body knows how to give birth. When you can understand what helps and hinders the natural process you can create the right environment for yourself.

- Communicate with your midwife during pregnancy; make sure you find out as much information as you can from her.
- Attend antenatal classes and active birth workshops
- Some women find it helpful to read The Pregnancy Book free to first time mums
- Other women use the internet. Try the National Childbirth Trust website www.nct.org.uk
- You can write a birth plan so we can understand your needs and feelings about labour.
- Think positively about the strength and reliability of your body.

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Coping with the latent phase of labour Advice for women

