



PRETERM LABOR

In most pregnancies, labor starts between 38 and 42 weeks of pregnancy. Preterm labor starts before the end of the 36th week. Labor starts with regular contractions of the uterus. The cervix thins out (effaces) and opens (dilates) as the baby can enter the birth canal. It is not known for certain what causes labor or preterm labor to start.

Preterm births account for about 75% of newborn deaths that are not related to birth defects. Growth and development in the last part of pregnancy is vital to the baby's health. The earlier the baby is born, the greater the risk of problems.

If preterm labor is found early enough, delivery can be prevented or postponed in some cases. This will give your baby time to grow and mature. Even a few more days may mean a healthier baby.

It can be hard to tell true and false labor apart. Preterm labor can be diagnosed only by finding changes in the cervix. It is common for women to have contractions before labor starts. This is called Braxton Hicks contractions or false labor. These may be painful and regular, but usually go away within an hour or with rest and hydration. If you have contractions more often than 6 times an hour and last for more than an hour, call our office right away for further instructions.

Signs of preterm labor:

- Change in vaginal discharge - watery, mucus or bloody
- Pelvic or lower abdominal pressure
- Constant, low, dull backache
- Mild abdominal cramps with or without diarrhea
- Regular or frequent contractions or uterine tightening often painless
- Ruptured membranes (your water breaks)

Women at risk: *(Note, preterm labor can happen to anyone without warning)*

- Little or no prenatal care
- Women with prior preterm delivery
- Problems with the placenta or certain birth defects
- You are carrying more than one baby (twins, triplets)
- You have a history one or more second trimester induced abortions
- Past surgery of the cervix
- Abnormal uterus or past uterine surgery
- Underweight or weight less than 100 pounds
- Smoking or use of cocaine

Monitoring contractions

To monitor yourself for contractions, you need to drink two large glasses of water, empty your bladder and lie down on your left side. Gently feel the entire surface of your lower abdomen with your fingertips. you are feeling for a firm tightening over the surface of our uterus. In most cases, these feelings of tightening are not painful. If you feel contractions, keep monitoring for an hour. Keep track of when each contraction starts and ends. Frequency of contractions are measured from the start of one contraction to the end of the next. If you contract more than once every 10 minutes (6/hr) but appear to be decreasing, then repeat a second hour. If you have a history of short labors or contractions are becoming closer and/or stronger, you need to call our office for further instructions or proceed to labor and delivery at Kennestone Hospital.

Keep in mind, a diagnosis of preterm labor can be made only after a pelvic exam has been done to see if your cervix has begun to change. You should contact your doctor each time you have more than 6 contractions per hour unless advised otherwise.

Sometimes rest and hydration is all that is needed to stop contractions. Other times, medications are needed. You may or may not need to stay in the hospital for medication administration.

Sometimes preterm labor may be too far along to be stopped or there may be reasons our baby may be better off by being delivered early (such as an infection, high blood pressure, bleeding, or indications of fetal distress). Many preterm babies are tiny and fragile and may need special medical care to eat, breath, and keep warm. Often, the lungs of a preterm baby are not fully developed. In these cases the preterm baby will be sent to the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). The length of stay in the NICU is determined on the degree of preterm of the baby and what if any complications have occurred. In spite of the best medical care, not all babies survive.

A preterm baby may have trouble swallowing and need to be fed through a tube. you may need to pump your breasts to provide breast milk for your baby. The benefits of breast milk far outweigh the ease of using a formula. The doctors and nurses in the NICU will help you understand all that is happening to your baby. you will be allowed to visit your baby as soon as possible.

Although the exact causes of preterm labor are not known, there are things you can do to improve your baby's chances of being born healthy. Get regular prenatal care, lead a healthy lifestyle, and be alert to warning signs.