

Obstetrics and Gynaecology

The Latent Phase of Labour

This information leaflet has been written to help you recognise the start of your labour and offer you advice and tips to help with the early phase, sometimes referred to as the latent phase of labour.

You may know that labour is divided in to three parts:

1. The first part of your labour is when the neck of the womb (cervix) gradually opens to 10 centimetres
2. The second part of your labour is when the baby moves down through the vagina and is born
3. The third part is when the afterbirth (placenta) is delivered

Working out whether you are in the early stages of labour or not can be very confusing for you. Remember that every woman's labour is different and sometimes it can take a long time. This is perfectly normal.

If you think you are in the early stages of labour, the main thing to remember is to stay calm and relaxed.

What is the latent phase of labour?

The latent phase is the beginning of the first part of your labour. It is a period of time that will not necessarily be continuous and is unique to each individual woman. Some women will have backache and cramps, or have bouts of contractions that may last a few hours which then stop and start up again the next day. This is perfectly normal.



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The duration of the latent phase of labour can be variable. It may last for 24 hours or more and can be exhausting for you. It helps if you can stay as relaxed as possible during this part of your labour and remain at home in comfortable surroundings as long as you can. This is an exciting time even if it is tiring.

What are Braxton Hicks contractions?

Braxton Hicks can occur all through the late stages of your pregnancy. They are the tightening of the muscle of the uterus which last between 30 – 60 seconds and may be several times an hour, several times a day.

How can I tell the difference between Braxton Hicks and real labour contractions?

Labour contractions are noticeably longer, more regular, increase in frequency and are generally more painful than Braxton Hicks contractions.

What is happening during the latent phase of labour?

Your contractions will feel uncomfortable but they may not be regular. They will be sharp but short lasting; this is normal. They will stop and start, last between 30–40 seconds and may continue for several hours. This is normal.

The neck of the womb (the cervix) has been long and closed during your pregnancy. These first contractions, along with the Braxton-Hicks contractions that you may have already experienced, help to soften the neck of the womb and prepare your body for active and established labour.

As the contractions become closer together, longer and stronger, the neck of the womb will also begin to shorten and then open up. Once the cervix is four centimetres dilated and the contractions are regular (at least every five minutes) and lasting for at least a minute, then labour has become active.

What should I do once the latent phase of labour begins?

If you think your labour is starting then you may want to seek advice from your midwife. You can ring the hospital at any time on the following numbers for support and advice from a midwife.

Lucina Birth Centre: 024 7696 7425

Maternity Triage: 024 7696 7333

Details of your call and the advice that you receive will be recorded in case you ring back with another query. You can ring back at any time of the day or night whenever you need further advice.

How can I help myself?

There are many ways of helping yourself to cope through these first hours of the latent phase of labour.

- It is important to try and remain relaxed.
- Keep your breathing deep, steady and slow during a contraction. This will prevent you from using extra energy. Once the contraction is wearing off, close your eyes and allow your body to rest before the next one.
- Take a warm bath or shower, at regular intervals. You will find the warmth of the water soothing and relaxing.
- The use of isotonic (energy) drinks will also add to your energy requirements and keep you hydrated.
- Ensure you maintain your energy levels by eating small, light meals containing carbohydrates.
- Remaining upright will assist gravity and help your baby to descend into the pelvis. Rocking your pelvis and swaying your hips can also assist you.
- If you have access to a birthing ball, use it regularly as this too can alleviate any discomfort. It will also help to widen your pelvis.

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- You may want to call your birthing partner for added support during this time. They will give you support and reassurance to help reduce your anxiety.
- It will be helpful if your partner massages your back to help with any backache and help you to relax and support you in any alternative positions that you may adopt.
- Your birthing partner can also make other family members aware of the latent phase of labour and encourage them to give support and help you to relax.
- It is also important to remain active without exhausting yourself during this time. Take a walk out with your partner, stopping if you need to during a contraction.

It is safe to take simple pain killers, such as Paracetamol. You can take two (500mg) tablets, every four to six hours. Do not take more than eight tablets within a 24 hour period.

Some women who have hired a TENS machine put it on during the latent phase.

When should I go into hospital?

If you have tried all of the above suggestions and your contractions are now regular and painful, you may want to ring the hospital again. The midwife will advise you depending on the information that you give.

If you are invited to go into the hospital then take your overnight bag with you. However, if labour has not yet established you may be asked to return home. This decision will be based on the findings of a thorough examination and based on research that suggests that labour wards are not the appropriate environment for women who are in the latent phase of labour.

We hope that this leaflet will have prepared you for the onset of labour and help you to be more relaxed and less fearful of the onset of labour.

Patient Information

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format please contact 024 7696 6678 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

The Trust operates a smoke free policy.

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References

National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (2014) Intra-partum care: care of healthy women and their babies during childbirth CG 190. London