

## Maternity

# The early (latent) phase of labour

This leaflet will help you recognise the start of your labour and give you advice and tips for the early phase, which is sometimes called the “latent phase.”

Labour usually happens in 3 parts:

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

It is hard to tell if labour is really starting. Every woman’s labour is different, and sometimes it can take a long time. This is normal.

If you think labour is starting, 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. This part is different for every woman. Some women will have backache and cramps or have contractions that can last a few hours, then stop, and start again the next day. This is completely normal.

This phase can last a long time, sometimes more than a whole day, and it can make you feel very tired. It helps if you stay calm, rest at home, and be somewhere comfortable. This is an exciting time even if it is tiring.



## **What are Braxton Hicks contractions?**

Braxton Hicks are your body practicing for labour. They can happen in the late stages of your pregnancy. The muscles in your uterus tighten, and this lasts between 30 and 60 seconds. You might feel them a few times an hour, a few times a day.

## **The difference between Braxton Hicks and real labour contractions**

Labour contractions last longer, more regular, keep getting stronger and are 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. They will come and go, last between 30 and 40 seconds, and may continue for several hours. This is normal.

The neck of the womb (the cervix) has been closed during your pregnancy. These first contractions, along with the Braxton-Hicks contractions that you may have felt, help to soften the neck of the womb, and get your body ready for labour.

As the contractions become closer together, longer, and stronger, the neck of the womb will also start to shorten and then open. When the cervix is 4 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 you do when the latent phase of labour starts?**

If you think your labour is starting, talk to your midwife. You can ring the hospital to get advice or ask questions.

Here are the phone numbers:

- **Lucina Birth Centre:** 024 7696 7425
- **Maternity Triage:** 024 7696 7333

The midwife will write down what you say and the advice they give in case you call again later. You can call any time of the day or night, if you need help, or are not sure what is happening.

### **How can you help yourself?**

There are lots of things you can do to feel better and stay calm during the early part of labour:

- Try to stay relaxed. It helps your body work better.
- Breathe slowly and deeply during a contraction. This will stop you from using extra energy. When the contraction stops, close your eyes and rest before the next one.
- Have a warm bath or shower. Warm water is soothing and relaxing.
- Drink isotonic (energy) drinks to stay hydrated and keep your energy up.
- Eat small, light meals with carbohydrates to give you strength.
- Stay upright, this will help your baby move down into the pelvis. Rocking your pelvis and swaying your hips can also help.
- Use a birthing ball if you have one. It can lessen discomfort and help widen your pelvis.
- Call your birthing partner for comfort and support.
- Ask your birthing partner for a back massage. It can help with backache and help you relax.
- Let your family know what is happening so they can support you too.
- It is important to still be active without exhausting yourself during this time. Take a walk 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 2 (500mg) tablets, every 4 to 6 hours. Do not take more than 8 tablets in a 24-hour period.
- Some women use a TENS machine during this phase.

### **When should you go to the hospital?**

If you have tried all the above tips and your contractions are now regular and painful, call the hospital again. The midwife will tell you what to do next.

If you are asked to go into the hospital, take your overnight bag with you. But, if labour has not really started, they might check you and then ask you to go back home. This is because the hospital isn't always the best place to be in the early part of labour.

## Patient Information

We hope this leaflet helps you feel more ready and less worries about labour starting.

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.

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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