

Stages of Labour

First Stage of Labour

The first stage of labour is the longest, lasting from a few hours to a few days. This stage happens in 3 phases: early, active – usually 12 hours or less – and transition. It begins with mild contractions and ends when the cervix is fully opened.

Early first stage of labour

What happens:

- cervix softens and opens to 3 to 4 cm
- baby's head comes down in your pelvis
- may have diarrhea
- mucus plug falls out of the cervix; may have pinkish discharge ("show")
- amniotic sac ("water") may leak or break

What you might feel:

- backache and pelvic pressure
- discomfort in thighs, hips or belly
- contractions that feel like mild cramps, last 20 to 45 seconds, and come every 10 to 20 minutes
- a trickle or gush of fluid

What you can do:

- carry on your usual activities, go for a walk or try to sleep or rest
- breathe normally until you can't talk through contractions, then start with slow breathing
- eat a light meal and drink fluids
- take a shower (not a bath, which can slow your contractions during early labour)
- use a sanitary pad and call your doctor if your water breaks

Active first stage of labour

What happens:

- cervix opens to 8 to 9 cm
- baby's head continues to move down in your pelvis
- "show" may become heavy, dark and bloody
- health care provider listens to baby's heartbeat every 15 to 30 minutes

What you might feel:

- stronger contractions every 3 to 5 minutes that last 45 to 60 seconds
- doubt as to whether you can cope with contractions
- quiet focus on yourself and your labour

What you can do:

- use relaxation techniques
- focus on breathing
- concentrate on one contraction at a time
- between contractions, keep moving and sip fluids or suck on ice chips
- pee frequently
- have a warm shower while sitting on a chair or leaning on your partner

Transition stage of labour

What happens:

- cervix opens fully to 10 cm
- baby moves down further into your pelvis
- health care provider listens to baby's heartbeat every 15 to 30 minutes

What you might feel:

- pressure on your bottom
- strong contractions every 2 to 3 minutes that last 60 seconds
- moments of panic and confusion
- irritability, difficulty saying what you need
- nausea, vomiting
- trembling arms and legs, leg cramps
- hot or cold flashes, sweating on face
- constant discomfort
- strong urge to push

What you can do:

- picture your cervix and body opening up to let your baby out
- tell someone if you have the urge to push
- use panting if you have the urge to push before you're fully dilated

What is fetal monitoring?

Listening to your baby's heart rate during active labour to see how it's being affected by contractions. Usually done with a hand-held stethoscope. If needed, an electronic monitor may be placed around your belly or clipped onto your baby's head.

Call your health care provider or hospital when:

- your contractions are regular and painful, last 30 to 60 seconds and come every 5 minutes or less
- your water breaks
- you have vaginal bleeding or pinkish discharge ("show")
- you're unsure and worried
- your health care provider has advised you to call early



SEEK CARE

If your water breaks and the fluid is green or brown, your baby has pooped. This may mean that she's stressed or in a breech position. Go to the hospital.

Second Stage of Labour

The second stage begins with your cervix fully open and ends with the birth of your baby. It can last from a few minutes to 2 or 3 hours.

What happens:

- health care provider breaks your bag of waters if necessary
- health care provider listens to baby's heartbeat every 5 minutes
- baby's head pushes down against your groin; may tear a bit, or doctor may make a small cut ("episiotomy") to allow more room
- vagina stretches
- you may poop as you push
- as head emerges, mucus in baby's nose and mouth may be suctioned out

What you might feel:

- powerful contractions every 2 to 3 minutes that last 60 to 90 seconds
- strong urge to push
- splitting and burning feeling on your bottom
- baby's head slipping back in between contractions
- emotional, surprised, overwhelmed, anxious or frightened
- very tired but with a burst of energy

What you can do:

- relax your bottom and go with the urge to push; use the muscles you use for a bowel movement
- use breathing techniques; drop your chin towards your chest and relax your tongue
- change positions as needed
- use relaxation techniques between contractions
- if asked to stop pushing, use panting
- touch your baby's head as it comes out
- look down or use a mirror to watch your baby being born



PARTNERS

What You Can Do

During contractions, look your partner in the eyes and help them focus on their breathing. Between contractions, wipe their forehead with cool cloths and offer sips of fluids. Stay with your partner and be calm, confident and encouraging.

Third Stage of Labour

In the third stage, your uterus contracts and the placenta comes out. This stage takes 5 to 30 minutes or longer.

What happens:

- umbilical cord is cut and clamped
- health care provider checks baby over
- placenta separates from the uterus wall and is pushed out the vagina
- uterus rises in the belly; becomes size and shape of a grapefruit
- tears or episiotomy are stitched up

What you might feel:

- cramps and a gush of blood as the placenta comes out
- relieved, grateful, joyful or unemotional
- exhausted, shaky, cold, hungry, thirsty

What you can do:

- cuddle your baby skin-to-skin on your chest
- bring baby to your breast to see if she's ready to suck



Fourth Stage of Labour

The fourth stage refers to the first 2 or 3 hours after birth.

What happens:

- your body begins to recover
- your baby may breastfeed or nuzzle your breast

What you might feel:

- very tired, dizzy, shaky, chilled
- difficulty peeing because of swelling
- discomfort

What you can do:

- keep your baby skin-to-skin until she finishes her first feeding and then for as long as you wish
- put an ice pack between your legs to reduce swelling
- drink fluids and have a light meal
- have someone help you if you need to get up



DID YOU KNOW

Waiting 12 or more hours after birth before bathing your baby will help keep her temperature steady and can help get breastfeeding off to a good start.



BE AWARE

If you're sleepy, have a support person with you when you're cuddling skin-to-skin with your baby.