



Signs & Symptoms of Premature Labor

Since no one can predict which expectant mothers will experience premature labor, it's important for all pregnant women to be aware of the signs. Quick recognition of these symptoms and prompt medical care increase the chances of stopping your labor, allowing your pregnancy to continue until your baby is more mature and has a better chance of good health at delivery.

What is premature labor?

Premature labor is labor which occurs more than three weeks before the expected due date. Uterine contractions (tightening of the womb) begin earlier than usual, which can result in the birth of a premature baby. Two-thirds of all newborn deaths are the result of prematurity.

Who has a higher than normal risk for premature labor?

- Woman who have had other premature deliveries
- Women with heart or kidney disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, or kidney infections
- Women who have had one or more miscarriages or abortions
- Women having the medical diagnosis "incompetent cervix"
- Pregnant teenagers younger than 17 years

Can premature labor be stopped?

In many cases premature labor can be stopped and the pregnancy can continue until the baby is more mature. This is only possible with medical help in early labor. The earlier you seek medical help for premature labor, the better the chances of stopping it.

If I am at risk for premature labor, will I have it?

Just because you have some risk factors for premature labor does not mean that you will experience it. It's best for all pregnant women, including those with increased risk, to learn the signs so that they can get help in time to stop premature labor.

What are the signs and symptoms of premature labor?

Any of the following signs could signal premature labor:

- Changes in low back ache (symptoms may come and go or be constant)
- Menstrual-like cramps occurring in the lower abdomen (cramps may come and go

or be constant)

- Abdominal cramping with or without diarrhea
- Uterine contractions that occur every ten minutes or more often (such as 3 in 30 minutes)
- Pelvic pressure (feels like the baby is pushing down; pressure may come and go)
- Changes in character of vaginal discharge (it may suddenly increase in amount or become watery or slightly bloody)

What are uterine contractions?

When any muscle in your body "contracts," it becomes hard or tight to the touch. When your uterus (womb), which is a muscle, contracts, you will feel the uterus get tight or hard. Premature labor contractions may be painless when they first start. When the contractions stop, your uterus becomes soft again.

It is normal for your uterus to contract at times during your pregnancy. This may happen when you first lie down, after walking up or down stairs, or after sex. You may notice more frequent contractions the last three weeks prior to your due date. If you feel a contraction every 10 minutes or more often for an hour (more than 5 contractions in an hour), then your uterus is contracting too much.

How can I check for contractions?

Lie down on your side and place your fingertips on your uterus. If your uterus is tightening and softening, you can time how often these tightenings (contractions) are happening. Note the time of the start of one contraction and how many minutes pass before the start of the next contraction. (Note: some contractions feel harder or stronger than others.)

Example: These contractions are 9-10 minutes apart.

Start

Contraction Length

10:00 am

45 seconds

10:10 am

60 seconds

10:20 am

55 seconds

10:29 am

60 seconds

When should I check for contractions?

Check for contractions every day. Because uterine contractions don't always hurt, they may occur with no warning signs. Twice per day, lie on your side (your left side is usually the best) and place your fingertips on your uterus (womb). Feel the contractions, or tightenings, for 30 minutes. Also monitor for these warning signs every day:

- Menstrual-like cramps
- Low dull backache
- Pelvic pressure
- Stomach cramps
- Increase or change in vaginal discharge

If any of these warning signals occur, check for contractions. Call your doctor if you feel your contractions are very painful, if you have bright red bleeding, or if you think your water has broken.

What should I do if I feel any contractions?

Drink 2-3 cups of water or juice and checking for contractions while lying on your left side. Sometimes this extra fluid will help stop contractions. Continue to check for contractions for 30 minutes. If you feel any contractions in this time frame, continue to check for at least another 30 minutes. If two hours after drinking the water/juice your contractions are still as close as 3 in 30 minutes call (334) 793-3900. Always call our office if you have any bleeding, any red, brown or pink discharge, or if you think your water has broken.