

## When Labour Starts

Early labour is a normal part of the birthing process

Seven Common Questions



[www.optimalbirthbc.ca](http://www.optimalbirthbc.ca)

01

### What is early labour?

Early labour is a normal part of labour and may last several hours, or even days. During early labour, your contractions begin and your cervix softens, shortens, and begins to open (dilate) between 0-3cm.

02

### What can I expect during early labour?

Contractions are often irregular and usually mild in the beginning but can vary in strength and intensity. Some women compare them to menstrual cramps. You may experience backache, stomach upsets, difficulty sleeping and emotional changes.

During early labour, your contractions may last 30-45 seconds, gradually becoming closer together and more regular. You may have a bloody, mucousy vaginal discharge and you may experience a gush or leaking of amniotic fluid.

03

### What should I do when I am in early labour?

- Stay active if this is what you feel like, or rest when you feel the need
- Eat light meals if you are hungry
- Drink plenty of fluids
- Empty your bladder often
- Practice breathing slowly and relaxing through contractions
- Have a shower
- Try different positions: leaning over a chair, rocking, hands and knees, etc.
- Use a heated bag on your lower back
- Have your support person give you a massage
- Try to stay relaxed and in a comfortable environment, as this can encourage contractions and reduce discomfort

→ **Early labour is a normal part of labour and may last several hours.**

04

### What if I need more help during early labour?

First, you should talk to your doctor, midwife or doula for support and information. You may decide to visit the hospital for support and to check your cervical dilation. At the hospital, they may offer you medication to help you relax and reduce the pain, however if you are in early labour, hospital staff may advise you to go home and return when labour has progressed.

05

### What if I have questions during early labour? Who can I talk to if I don't know what to do?

During early labour, you can call your midwife, doctor or doula. It is a good idea to ask ahead of time how to reach them outside of office hours. You may also call the hospital maternity unit and speak to a nurse.

06

### Do I need someone to stay with me?

Find what makes you feel safe and comfortable. For some women, the presence of a trusted person with whom they feel a close personal connection can increase their comfort and wellbeing during labour. This could be a partner, a close friend, or a doula. Other women find that they feel most comfortable on their own, with a support person waiting nearby in case they need them. Do not hesitate to ask others to accommodate your needs.

07

### How will I know when to go to hospital?

Call your midwife or doctor and discuss your labour progress. It is time to go to the hospital when your labour becomes more intense - as you move from early labour into active labour, contractions become stronger, more regular and closer together (5 minutes or less). You may not feel like talking, and it may take all of your concentration to deal with the contractions. You may also go to the hospital if you are in early labour but are having trouble coping with your contractions at home.

→ A support person can help you cope with the contractions and other discomforts of labour.



### Signs that you may be having a fast labour and should call your doctor or midwife:

- You feel the baby moving down
- You have pressure on your rectum, like you want to have a bowel movement
- You feel like pushing or bearing down with each contraction
- If you have any of these signs and are unable to reach your midwife or doctor, do not hesitate to go to the hospital.

### Go straight to the hospital if you:

- Have heavy vaginal bleeding (bright red)
- Have noticed that your baby has stopped moving or is moving much less than normal
- Have a fever of 38°C (100.4°F) or higher
- Have amniotic fluid leaking from your vagina

After reading this pamphlet, you may have other questions about your own situation and about what you should do in early labour. Please discuss this pamphlet with your doctor or midwife.

**Please note:** The information in this pamphlet may not be appropriate if you have health issues that may affect your pregnancy and childbirth. Ask your care provider for personal advice related to your situation.

If you are experiencing early labour symptoms before 36 weeks gestation, call your doctor or midwife.



Perinatal Services BC

