

Latent phase of labour (early labour)

Information for pregnant women

What is latent phase of labour?

The term 'latent phase' refers to the experience some women have at the beginning of their labours. They feel like painful tightenings or contractions, which do not develop a regular pattern, last a good few hours and then stop for a while. It can be called 'pre labour' or 'false labour' but it is a sign that your body is thinking about going into labour; and it is normal.

It begins after 37 weeks of pregnancy and is more common when expecting your first baby, but can occur in second and subsequent pregnancies. Some women do not experience latent phase at all.

The contraction may be felt as severe period pain low down or further up your tummy, severe backache, or a combination of both. Quite often it is difficult to time these in the latent phase of labour as they can vary in length and frequency. It is a sign that your body is practicing labour, and timing is not necessary. Although the contractions are irregular and stop they will be having a positive effect on your body. They will be softening the cervix and preparing it to go into labour, and encouraging your baby into a good position in your pelvis; getting your baby ready for labour.

These are all things you cannot see, but every contraction you have helps to lead to a normal safe birth.

The important thing to remember is that it is NORMAL.

What can I do during this latent phase of labour?

The best place for you to be at this point is in your own home. It is where you are comfortable, and you can contact the hospital at any time for advice, but there is no need to be 'checked over' unless the latent phase has lasted for several days.

This stage can be very tiring, but there are lots of effective things you can do to help you to be comfortable, and to encourage your labour to progress.

Staying calm is the key to getting through the latent phase of labour. By trying a combination of the suggestions below you may feel more comfortable and confident at home until your contractions become stronger and regular:

- Be mobile and active. Go for a gentle walk or just carry on with things about the house. Walking up and down stairs is a good way to encourage labour, but you do not need to be on your feet the whole time. Make sure you get some rest when you are feeling tired.
 - Find comfortable, upright positions; for example: kneeling, crouching and sitting on a birthing ball, if you have one. All of these will encourage your baby to move down and help to get labour going.
 - Have plenty to eat and drink; it can be exhausting and you need energy to progress to full labour. Small regular snacks of food are good with plenty to drink to keep you hydrated.
 - Take simple pain killers – we recommend ordinary paracetamol 1gm (x2 500mg tablets) every four to six hours not exceeding eight tablets in 24 hours. This may be enough to take the edge off the pain and let you get some sleep.
 - A warm bath is very soothing and a good source of pain relief. Ensure the bath is full enough to cover your abdomen and relax in; stay there for as long as you are comfortable.
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- A hot water bottle or wheat bag can be extremely soothing. Wrap it in a towel or cover; rather than putting it directly onto your skin.
 - TENS machines are something many women find helpful. They can be hired from several companies or bought at larger chemist stores; and we have a very small stock, which we can 'loan' for a small donation, provided they are returned.
 - Relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises can be very useful, and your birth partner can help you with this. Concentrate on breathing out, whilst dropping your shoulders, breathe in through your nose and blow the breath out through your mouth as if gently blowing up a balloon. Continue this until the contraction has gone, and then breathe normally.
 - Aromatherapy and the use of massage can be of great benefit during the latent phase. Massaging your back can be very soothing for the pain; and helps you to relax and de-stress. We have a small stock of aromatherapy oils, which can be given for you to take home after you have been given instructions for usage.
 - If you are worried or anxious or need reassurance that all is well, please ring the number on the front of your notes. There is a midwife to talk to, day and night, on this line. She can give advice and discuss any problems or concerns. If she feels it would be helpful, she will ask you to come in to be assessed.

What to look out for whilst you are at home?

There are several things you should check whilst you are in the latent phase of labour:

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- **Is my baby moving?** You do not need to count movements, but if you think your baby is not moving as usual, please ring for advice.
 - **Do I have any flow from my vagina?** A show is a small amount of thick sticky mucous coming from your vagina and is a sign that labour may start soon. It may look like the loss you would have at the beginning or end of your monthly period. Some people describe it as looking like egg white. It may contain a little blood, which can be brown (old blood) or red (fresher blood); and this is all normal. If you notice a loss from your vagina, which is not sticky or has a bad smell or is enough to soak through a sanitary pad, it needs to be discussed; so please ring and speak to the midwife.
 - **Have my waters broken?** (sometimes also called ruptured membranes). Most women's waters break once they are in labour, but sometimes this happens before. If you have a lot of fluid coming out of your vagina and soaking through a sanitary pad, it could be that your waters have broken. Sometimes you may feel them break with a 'pop' followed by a gush or trickle of fluid. You need to put on a fresh sanitary towel and ring in to the hospital. The midwife will ask you for the following information:
 1. What time do you think that your waters broke?
 2. What is the colour of the fluid? For example, is it clear, brownish or greenish?
 3. Do you have a sanitary towel in place?
 4. Is your baby moving normally?

We would advise you to come to the hospital to be checked over if your waters have broken; but if all seems well, you may then go home to relax and wait for your contractions to start as most women will go into labour within a day of their waters breaking.

How to recognise when it labour is beginning?

Labour is different for everyone. The following signs are a guide to when you are moving into 'established' labour; if you are not sure then ring and speak to the midwife:

- Look at how often the pain is coming, and where you are feeling it, how long it lasts, how strong it is and whether you are coping with it.
- As labour progresses, the contractions will get closer together, eventually coming every few minutes, gradually become more painful reaching a peak and then subsiding again until it goes away. You may notice that it is different from previous latent phase contractions.
- When you are in strong labour, you will probably have to stop what you are doing and concentrate to get through the pain. You will probably not be able to talk through labour contractions.
- You may find the things that have been helping you to cope at home are no longer enough; and you will instinctively feel that you want to be in the place where your baby will be born.
- You may experience more 'show'; this is normal and is generally a good sign that things are progressing. It should still not soak through a sanitary towel and if this happens, it is important to ring the hospital straightaway.

When should I call to let the hospital know what is happening?

Please call the hospital at any time for advice and guidance or if you are worried about anything. Midwives are able to answer your questions from 16 weeks of pregnancy up to 28 days after you have had your baby.

No question is a silly question, or not worth answering. And we do not mind however many times you call before you come into the hospital.

We would rather you were happy and confident at home than worrying about things.

If it is your first baby, we suggest you wait until contractions have been regular for a couple of hours before calling. However, if you are worried, please call and we can chat through your worries.

What will happen when I come in to hospital?

You will be asked to come to the Antenatal Unit, Maternity Triage on Level 2, Women and Children's sector at The Tunbridge Wells Hospital (The Green Zone). This is where all women are seen and checked when they arrive.

If you are found to be in very early labour, we will advise you to go home again as your labour is then more likely to progress normally. We will give you advice and information to help you cope.

If you are in strong labour, but coping well, you may choose to go for a coffee or a walk until you feel ready to go to Delivery Suite.

And finally

Remember that everyone labours differently and pain is very individual.


We will try to give you our best advice and support to help you manage your labour, and have a good safe birth.

Please use this space to write any notes or questions you may have.


Further information and advice can be obtained from:

**Tunbridge Wells Hospital at Pembury
Maternity Triage**

 01892 633500

 01892 633503

Maidstone Birth Centre


 01622 220161

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Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

If you would like to raise any concerns, make comments and suggestions or require information on Trust services, you can contact **PALS**. Office opening times are Monday to Friday 10.00am to 4.00pm. Both offices offer a 24 hour answering machine. Messages will be responded to within one working day, so please do leave a contact number.

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