

## Signs of Labor

Labor normally starts when your baby is full grown ("at term"). Normal labor can start as early as two weeks before your due date to as late as two weeks after your due date. If labor begins before the two weeks prior to your due date, your baby is at risk for prematurity. If labor does not commence until after the two weeks following your due date, your delivery is at risk for complications.

Labor occurs when your uterus begins to tighten over and over again in an effort to push the baby out. This tightness or contractions are felt from the back, then spread over the whole belly area. Contractions last from about forty-five to sixty seconds and occur about every ten to twenty minutes. After an hour or two, these contractions usually become stronger and are closer together. False labor is pain, often felt in the low belly, which does not reoccur according to a regular time pattern. These pains usually go away in a few hours.

Sometimes a small amount of thick blood-streaked mucous ("mucous plug") may come from the cervix, through the vagina, during labor. Expelling the mucous plug during labor is normal. Some women experience a sudden gush or slow leaking of clear fluid (amniotic fluid) from their vagina. This is the liquid that has surrounded and cushioned the baby during the pregnancy. Usually this fluid is forced out toward the end of labor, but in about ten percent of pregnant women, the waters break earlier. Contact your doctor immediately if your water breaks.

If you have determined that you are actually in labor, use a clock to time the duration and frequency of the contractions. When the contractions are strong and occurring about ten minutes apart, contact your doctor. Do not eat or drink anything since some women have diarrhea or vomit during labor. If you are scheduled for a cesarean, contact your doctor as soon as contractions begin.

Contact your doctor immediately if you experience any of the following:

- Decreased fetal movement
- Vaginal bleeding
- Rupture of membranes (bag of water)
- Pain not associated with uterine contractions
- Uterine contractions if you have a scheduled c-section