

HOW WILL I KNOW IF IT'S REALLY LABOR?

For nine months you have been waiting anxiously for labor and the new life it brings. You look forward to the events of the day with ambivalence, a combination of joy mixed with a fear of the unknown.

Allowing this process to proceed according to nature's plan, makes it necessary for us to let our bodies perform the way they were meant to. It means we have to know our own strengths and abilities, and understand our body. It takes stamina and flexibility to let go of our need to control.

Labor will be a new and unfamiliar experience. You probably have preconceived ideas about what it will be like or how you will handle it, but the fact is you've never been through anything quite like this before.

If we knew why labor begins, we might be more able to predict its beginning. Our best means to predict is by being familiar with the process to be more able to recognize the signs.

EARLY SIGNS

Some ladies notice that the last few weeks of pregnancy bring welcomed changes in their body. They are able to breathe more easily and deeply. This is due to the baby settling into the pelvis. Not only can you breathe a sigh of relief from comfort, but also from the knowledge that "the end is nigh". This "lightening" may cause the baby to press more on your bladder, however, so you may be exchanging one set of discomforts for another. You may experience increased pressure in your lower abdomen, legs, and perineum. Some women develop hemorrhoids, varicose veins and perineal congestion temporarily. This descent of the baby into your pelvis is measured in stations. When your baby becomes ENGAGED, it is at the midpoint "zero" station. The move through the pelvis is forced by contractions and directed by the bony pelvis. Each individual experiences unique sensations due to their particular body type, pain tolerance, and emotional sensitivity. That is why it is hard for anyone to predict how you will perceive contractions.

CONTRACTIONS

Labor pains are muscular contractions of the uterus that force the baby through the pelvis and birth canal. They start for unknown reasons and can be unpredictable as the woman they annoy. As the uterus contracts, it straightens to position the baby against the cervix.

The cervix is pulled up and around the baby repeatedly until it is no longer in the way. Then the contractions gradually push the baby through the vagina and perineal floor. All this pushing, pulling, and squeezing is a little more than uncomfortable for the mom. Usually, contractions begin subtly. They feel very similar to the "warm up" Braxton

Hicks contractions that become increasingly irritating in later pregnancy. But as labor progresses, the contractions become stronger and more intense. They are harder to ignore. As a pattern develops, you should try to take note of how labor is progressing by timing the contractions periodically. See how many occur within a 15 minute period, and time how long they last.

OTHER SIGNS

Because “real labor” causes the cervix to change, you may notice other signs as the contractions intensify. Some women notice that the mucus plug has been passed – although this may occur quite awhile before the baby is born. The vaginal discharge becomes pink or bloody tinged as the cervix ripens and tiny capillaries in it stretch and rupture. This “show” should never be as heavy as a period.

Some lucky women experience a burst of energy. In labor, you need all the energy you can get, so save a little for later. Don’t expend it all on cleaning projects or redecorating. Walking will usually alleviate false contractions or stimulate true ones. When changes in your position stop contractions or stimulate true ones. When changes in your position stop contractions, it’s usually a sign that this is not true labor. Remember true labor changes the cervix – that means that even professionals who deal with labor all the time have to observe a lady for a few hours to see if her contractions are accomplishing anything. Only time will tell if the contractions you are experiencing are changing the cervix. True labor begins the same way false labor begins, so don’t ever be embarrassed if you can’t tell the difference. Many times we can’t either, initially.

Sometimes women will have symptoms of flu in early labor. They are nauseated, vomit, and have cramping and diarrhea. Uterine contractions can be easily disguised by the cramps of diarrhea.

Ruptured membranes is the only positive sign that a “Birthday” is imminent. The amniotic membrane is the baby’s best defense against infection, so once it breaks the baby will be born within 24-28 hours, with or without nature’s permission. Usually contractions begin within six hours, but if they don’t, the doctor can stimulate them to begin with medication. Rubbing the nipples may also be used to stimulate the body to produce oxytocin, which causes contractions to occur when the cervix is ripe.

The bag of water holds a quart or more, so as you approach your due date you are always at risk of it breaking at any time or place. You can dribble a teaspoonful or gush a quart. Let your doctor know if you are suspiciously damp at any time during your later pregnancy. As the vagina changes, it produces increased mucus. It is often difficult to determine the difference between heavy mucus and a teaspoonful of fluid. Don’t take chances. Sometimes the only way to tell if the fluid is amniotic fluid is by checking it with Ph paper.

Now you can see that nothing about labor is “for sure”. There are no hard and fast rules to go by. That is why it is important to become familiar with all those little

idiosyncrasies of your body. Become aware to the changes that have become normal to your body during pregnancy and the habits of your baby when you are trying to decide some night if this is “the real thing” or not. Ask yourself some questions:

DO YOU NOTICE

Flu symptoms (vomiting and diarrhea)?
A burst of energy?
Pressure in your legs, pelvis, or perineum?

If NO, it is no big deal – BUT:

If YES, ask – Do these correlate with contractions? If YES again – ask:

WHAT ARE THE CONTRACTIONS LIKE?

- Are they abdominal pains – if YES, be patient. But if they radiate from the front to the back, time them and ask yourself:
- Are they strong and regular? If NO, wait and be patient. If YES, change your activity. Do you still have them? If YES, start packing! If NO, go back to sleep (no Birthday today).

FINALLY:

IS THERE A VAGINAL DISCHARGE?

If NO, (“See, I told you to go back to sleep”)

If YES, (“is it milky and thick?...probably mucus”) Does it smell like urine? (It probably IS urine, silly)

Is it thin, warm, leak uncontrollably and smell like weak bleach? Is it blood tinged?
Then, **NOTE THE TIME AND CALL THE DOCTOR.**

Paying attention to your body as it changes makes it easier for you to work WITH labor and not against it. If will probably become impossible to control what is happening, so instead of engaging in a battle with your body, allow it to function in the way nature intended it to.