

Early Signs of Labour

Very few babies arrive on their due date. Labour usually begins between 38 and 42 weeks into your pregnancy. Here are the signs of the first stage of labour.

1 You feel contractions

Regular contractions are often the first sign of labour.

The earliest contractions usually feel like period pains. Some women feel pain in their lower back every twenty or thirty minutes.

You can time your contractions by counting the seconds from the start of one pain to its end. You time the interval between contractions by counting the minutes between the start of one pain and the start of the next pain. If you do this five times and find that the pains are regular, last for more than thirty seconds and are less than five minutes apart, you are probably in the first stage of labour. If you have contractions like this, call your midwife.

Some women feel contractions before labour actually begins. You can tell if you're not yet in labour if the pains you feel are irregular, if they don't get stronger or you can find a way (like changing your position, going for a walk or eating or drinking) to ease the pain or stop it completely. Call your midwife if you're not sure what's happening.

2 Your 'waters break'

This happens when the amniotic sac that surrounds the baby ruptures and the amniotic fluid escapes into the vagina. 'Breaking waters' are the first sign of labour in roughly one in every five pregnancies.

The waters may gush out in a flood or they may trickle out. You may even feel the sac pop.

Your waters may have broken if you can't control the flow of fluid from your vagina, if fluid keeps leaking, or you find fluid that doesn't smell like urine. The fluid should be clear, or it may have a very pale pink colour. If the fluid is brown, green or any other colour, call your midwife immediately.

If your waters have broken, use a pad – not a tampon – to soak up the fluid. It may leak for some time. Tell your midwife what has happened.

3 You see a 'show'

While you are pregnant, a plug of mucous seals the cervix to keep the baby safe from infection. When the cervix starts to open, the plug may come loose and some or all of it discharges into the vagina. It looks like a mixture of slime and blood. This is the 'show'.

Some women never notice the 'show'. If you see it, and there are no other signs of labour, it usually means that labour will start in the next few days.

Call your midwife immediately if you have vaginal bleeding that isn't mixed with slimy mucous.

4 Other signs of labour

There are other things you may notice when labour has started. You may shiver or tremble. This can be frightening, but it's the way that your body copes with the tension of labour and it shouldn't last for long. You may find you need to empty your bladder more often and you may get diarrhoea.

The first stage of labour

The first stage of labour usually lasts between eight and 16 hours. You will feel the pain of contractions but you are just as likely to feel excited and perhaps a little apprehensive.

The best place to be while you are in the first stage of labour is at home or any other place where you feel safe and comfortable. You might want to stick to your usual routines or you might want something different – it's easier to suit yourself in your own place than it is in the birthing unit or hospital.

You and your midwife will decide together when it's time for you to go to the birthing unit or hospital. Call your midwife if you have any questions. Call your midwife immediately – whatever time it is– if you are frightened, if you need pain relief or you cannot feel the baby moving.