

FACT SHEET #5 THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF PRETERM LABOR

WHAT IS PRETERM LABOR?

Preterm Labor is labor that occurs before 37 completed weeks of pregnancy. If not stopped, the baby delivers preterm and is at high risk for problems.

WHY SHOULD PEOPLE LEARN ABOUT PRETERM LABOR?

No one can predict who will have preterm labor. It can happen to any pregnant woman, and preterm labor can lead to preterm birth.

HOW DOES PRETERM BIRTH AFFECT THE BABY?

Babies born more than 3 weeks before their due date can have serious problems such as breathing, eating, keeping blood sugars normal, staying warm, and with jaundice. Some preterm babies will also have life-threatening or life-long health disabilities like cerebral palsy, blindness and chronic lung problems, or milder problems like behavior and learning problems, clumsiness, or ADHD. The effects of preterm birth can also increase the likelihood of diseases in adulthood. One example of this is diabetes, with preterm babies having 18 times the risk for developing diabetes as an adult, compared to babies born at full-term.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS (WARNING SIGNS) OF PRETERM LABOR?

Each of the signs and symptoms below could mean the pregnant woman is experiencing preterm labor. She doesn't need to experience all of them—even one symptom is too many.

- Uterine contractions every 10 minutes or more often
- Menstrual-like cramps in the lower abdomen that come and go or are constant
- Low dull backache below the waistline that comes and goes or is constant
- Pelvic pressure feels like the baby pushing down, and it may come and go
- Abdominal cramping with or without diarrhea
- Vaginal discharge that suddenly increases or has mucous, water, or blood

All women should learn to recognize the signs of preterm labor. If they happen, get help quickly.

HOW TO CHECK FOR CONTRACTIONS

She should lie down and place her hands against her abdomen. If her uterus tightens (contracts) and then softens (relaxes), she is having a contraction. Some may be harder or stronger than others, but she needs to know that preterm labor contractions are often painless.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PRETERM LABOR CONTRACTIONS AND BRAXTON HICKS CONTRACTIONS?

While it can sometimes be normal for the uterus to contract off and on during pregnancy (Braxton Hicks), these are more likely to occur when she first lies down, after sex, or after she walks up and down stairs. However, it is not normal to have regular, frequent contractions before the pregnancy reaches full-term. If she experiences 6 or more contractions in 1 hour, then her uterus is contracting too often and this puts the pregnancy at risk for preterm labor. She should call her health care provider right away if this happens.

WHAT OTHER SYMPTOMS SHOULD BE REPORTED TO THE HEALTH CARE PROVIDER?

She should call right away if:

- She has any water coming from her vagina
- She has any blood coming from her vagina
- She experiences any of the signs and symptoms of preterm labor

Waiting too long to call for help could result in the baby being born too early.

Depending on her symptoms, the health care provider may tell her to come to the hospital immediately, or may recommend other ways to further evaluate the situation.

WHAT CAN PREGNANT WOMEN DO?

Learn the things to do that help a pregnancy go to full-term. She should tell her doctor if she has had a previous baby that was born before 37 weeks; that is the strongest predictor that the next baby might be preterm, and the doctor will want to watch her and the baby more closely. Learn the warning signs of preterm labor and react quickly if they happen; get the help needed to try to prevent the baby from being born too early. If the doctor advises her to deliver before 39 weeks, she should understand the medical reasons why and be aware that there are risks involved with having a scheduled induction of labor, and/or a scheduled Cesarean section without medical reasons. She should discuss with her provider how to maximize the chances for a healthy, full-term baby. (See also Fact Sheet #9.)

Remember that *Healthy Babies are Worth the Wait!*