

WHY SHOULD YOU LEARN ABOUT PRETERM LABOR?

A healthy term for a pregnancy is about 40 weeks. Preterm labor is labor that happens too early, before 37 weeks of pregnancy. The baby's brain and other organs haven't had time to fully grow by this time. If you have preterm labor, your baby could be born too early.

No one knows who will have preterm labor. It can happen to any woman. Learn the signs of preterm labor so you know what to do if preterm labor happens to you.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF PRETERM LABOR?

The signs of preterm labor are often the same as for regular labor, only they happen too early. Even having one of the signs could mean you are having preterm labor. The signs include:

- Contractions that make your belly tighten up like a fist every ten minutes or more often
- Change in the color of your vaginal discharge, or bleeding from your vagina
- The feeling that your baby is pushing down. This is called pelvic pressure
- Low, dull backache
- Cramps that feel like your period
- Belly cramps with or without diarrhea

HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU'RE HAVING CONTRACTIONS?

Lie on your back and place your hands against your belly. If you feel your belly tightening (contracting) and then softening (relaxing), you are having a contraction. Some contractions may be harder or stronger than others. Contractions often do not hurt.

WHAT ARE BRAXTON HICKS CONTRACTIONS? HOW DO THEY DIFFER FROM LABOR CONTRACTIONS?

Braxton Hicks contractions are a normal part of pregnancy. They prepare your body for labor and delivery and tend to increase in the weeks right before your due date. These contractions are irregular (don't happen in a regular pattern) and are likely to happen in the afternoon or evening—especially when you are tired or have had a lot of physical activity during the day.

Labor contractions signal the beginning of childbirth. These labor contractions come at regular intervals, last between 30 and 70 seconds, and get stronger and closer together over time. If you have regular contractions every 10 minutes or more often **before 37 weeks of pregnancy**, you may be having preterm labor. Call your provider right away if this happens to you.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU HAVE ANY OF THE SIGNS OF PRETERM LABOR?

Call your provider right away even if you only have one sign of preterm labor. If you wait too long to call for help, your baby could be born too early. Your provider may tell you to:

- Come into the office or go to the hospital.
- Stop what you're doing.
- Rest on your left side for 1 hour.
- Drink 2 to 3 glasses of water or juice. Do not drink coffee or soda.

Call your provider again or go to the hospital if signs get worse or do not go away. If the signs go away, take it easy for the rest of the day.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO PREVENT PRETERM LABOR?

Here are some things you can do to reduce your risk for preterm labor:

- Tell your provider if you have already had a preterm baby or if preterm labor runs in your family. These things make you more likely than other women to have a preterm baby. Your provider may want to watch you more closely.
- Learn the signs of preterm labor and know what to do if they happen to you.
- Rest and take care of yourself while you are pregnant.
- Get to all appointments with your healthcare provider to be sure you and the baby get checked out all through the pregnancy.

If you think you may be having preterm labor, do not hesitate to call your provider – don't wait until things have gone too far for your provider to help.