



Preterm Labor

Preterm labor is when a pregnant woman has contractions that cause the cervix to open, shorten and thin before 37 weeks of pregnancy. The normal length of a pregnancy is 39 to 41 weeks.

Causes

Often, there is no identifiable underlying cause as to why a woman goes into preterm labor. However, one of the most common known causes of preterm labor is infection. Infections of the uterus, cervix, vagina, amniotic sac, bladder, kidney or even the lungs (pneumonia) can cause labor to start. Other causes of preterm labor include:

- Urogenital infections, such as yeast infections and bacterial vaginosis
- Uterine abnormalities (uterine shape, uterine septum, fibroids, bleeding from the placenta)
- A cervix that has been operated on and opens prematurely
- Malformations in the baby
- Multiple gestations (twins, triplets, etc)
- Breakage of the amniotic sac

Additional risk factors for preterm labor include:

- Previous history of preterm labor
- Premature rupture of membranes (PROM)
- A placenta that covers the opening of the cervix (placenta previa)
- A placenta that separates from the uterus (placenta abruption)
- A cervix that is too weak to hold the baby in the uterus (incompetent cervix)
- Having too much fluid in the amniotic sac (polyhydramnios)
- Taking illegal drugs or smoking while pregnant
- Not gaining enough weight while pregnant
- Women younger than 18 and older than 35 years old
- Low socioeconomic status
- African-American ethnicity

Symptoms

Signs and symptoms of preterm labor include:

- Menstrual-like cramps
- Contractions that are 30-70 seconds apart, become very regular, closer together and are more intense and painful
- Contractions that start on the top of the uterus and spread down to the lower abdomen and back
- A sense of increased pelvic pressure or back pain
- A watery or bloody discharge that comes from the vagina

Diagnosis

A diagnosis can be confirmed by:

- A vaginal exam
- An ultrasound of the cervix
- Sampling (swabbing) cervico-vaginal secretions. These samples can be tested for the presence of fetal fibronectin. This is a protein found in cervical discharge which is associated with preterm labor.
- Fetal monitoring

Treatment

Depending on the length of the pregnancy and other circumstances, a caregiver may suggest bed rest. If necessary, there are medicines that can be given to stop contractions and to quicken fetal lung maturity. If labor happens before 34 weeks of pregnancy, a prolonged hospital stay may be recommended. Treatment depends on the condition of both the mother and baby.

Get help right away if:

- You are having contractions
- You have belly (abdominal) pain
- You have bleeding from your vagina
- You have pain when you pee (urinate)
- You have abnormal vaginal discharge
- You have a temperature by mouth above 100.4 degrees

Please call your doctor's office or Women and Children's Services (940-626-1229) if you have any questions.