

Coping in the latent phase of labour

Labour is a natural, physiological process, which for many women can take a long time. Here is some information and advice to help you prepare and get through the early stages.

Firstly, labour has three stages:

- The **first stage**, when the neck of the womb (cervix) opens to 10cm.
- The **second stage**, when the baby moves down through the vagina (birth canal) and is born.
- The **third stage**, when the placenta (afterbirth) is delivered.

What is the 'latent' phase of labour?

The latent phase of labour is the early part of the first stage of labour. Before labour begins the neck of the womb is long, firm and closed. During the latent phase of labour this shortens in length and softens. Midwives and doctors refer to this as effacement. The cervix can also open up to 3-4cm. Many women experience contractions, but they are often **irregular** in occurrence, **short lasting** and **milder** in strength than those experienced when you are in the active phase of your labour.

The latent phase of labour can **last several days** before active labour starts. This is normal. Some women experience '**period**' type cramps and **backache** and some will experience **short periods of contractions** lasting a few hours, which stop and start up again the following day.

Remember, the latent phase of labour can last a long time, especially for first time mums.

Other signs of labour beginning:

The 'show'

As the neck of the womb starts to shorten, soften and open, the mucous, which has been protecting the entrance to your womb can come away. It has a **jelly like appearance** and is often **tinged with pink or brown** from blood. It may also be clear. This is all normal. Experiencing a show is a sign that your body is getting ready to go into labour but the actual

birth is for most women still some time away.

If there is ever any bright red blood on its own, telephone the maternity assessment centre (MAC) or delivery suite immediately.

Your waters breaking:

Your baby is surrounded by **amniotic fluid** (your waters). Your waters may break before active labour starts. This occurs in about **1 in 10 women**.

Some women leak a small amount of urine at the end of pregnancy and so it can be **sometimes difficult to tell** if your waters have broken or if it is urine.

If you are not sure, put a sanitary pad on and sit down for 30 minutes. If it is wet then it is likely that your waters have gone. If you experience a large gush then it is likely that your waters have broken and you should telephone the maternity assessment centre or delivery suite.

The majority of women will go into labour within 24 hours of their waters breaking; however you will need to be assessed by a midwife during this time.

If your waters have broken take a note of the colour. The waters are often clear or straw coloured. This is normal. If you think they are **green, brown or blood stained** then you should contact the maternity assessment centre straight away. Keep an eye on your **baby's movements** as they should remain the same.

Contractions:

Contractions can **stop and start** during the latent phase **or** they may be **continuous for several hours** but be **short lasting** and **mild**. This is normal.

If your contractions do stop, use it as an opportunity to get some rest and have something to **eat and drink**. This will both **preserve and build up your energy supplies**, which will help your contractions to build up again. **Drinking adequate water** is particularly important because if you become dehydrated this can cause labour to slow down or stop altogether.

This can be a very tiring time. If you telephone the maternity assessment centre during this time and everything sounds normal **a midwife will advise you to stay at home** for as long as possible until your **contractions** are **longer lasting** – about 40-60 seconds – and **much stronger**. This is because the majority of women are more relaxed in their home environment. However, if you ever feel that you would like to come into hospital sooner we would be more than happy to see you.

Research evidence suggests that if you stay at home during the latent phase of labour you are more likely to have a normal birth.

Coping strategies for the latent phase of labour:

Find something to distract yourself from the contractions, something that you would do normally to help you feel relaxed. This might include:

- Going out for a walk
- Taking a nap
- Having a warm bath or shower
- Listening to a playlist of your favourite music
- Watching a DVD
- Try sitting on your gym ball if you have one and leaning against your bed
- Put a hot water bottle on areas that ache, such as your lower back, underneath your bump or between your thighs
- Ask your birth partner to do some massage
- Remaining up and mobile can help you progress more quickly as this will allow gravity to work on your side
- Drink plenty of fluids and eat little and often. Water, energy drinks and carbohydrates such as bread, pasta, rice and cereal will help to keep you hydrated and build and store your energy supplies
- Some women find it helpful to use a TENS machine

Remember!

Labour is as much a psychological event as a physical one. Try not to over think things. Being over anxious can result in stress, which can cause your body to release adrenaline. This can suppress oxytocin (the hormone that causes contractions) and endorphins (your body's natural pain relief), which may cause your labour to slow down and/or become more painful.

This is why distraction techniques such as those mentioned on the previous page can really help.

Breathing techniques

Maintaining a calm breathing pattern will help you to feel relaxed and in control during contractions. As you breathe in count backwards from three and as you breathe out think the word 'relax'. Repeating the cycle 'three, two, one.....relax' will help to keep your breathing long, slow and controlled. Ask your birth partner to say the words out loud.

“Three, two, one.....relax”

Preparation is the key!

You should now be equipped with some useful tools to help you cope with the latent phase of labour. No birth is ever the same but having an understanding of what is happening to your body and knowing what **you** can do to help **yourself** will have a **positive impact** upon

your birth experience.

Have the confidence that your body is perfectly designed to birth your baby.

A midwife is always available in the maternity assessment centre or on delivery suite to talk to if you need some advice or reassurance.

MAC: 01423 557531 (0800-2000) Delivery suite: 01423 553184

If you require this information in an alternative language or format (such as Braille, audiotape or large print), please ask the staff who are looking after you.