

Your Pregnancy: Signs of Preterm Labor

Every pregnancy is unique, and so is every labor. In most pregnancies, labor usually begins after 37 weeks.

But when labor comes *before* week 37, this is called preterm or premature labor.

A lot of people have practice contractions, which are called Braxton Hicks contractions.

That's why it can be hard to know if a contraction is just your body practicing or if you're really in labor.

After you learn the signs of preterm labor, you may feel a little more confident about telling the difference.

It can help to know what's happening in your body.

Now, all contractions happen when the muscles of the uterus tighten and then relax.

But the practice contractions are usually irregular and will usually stop if you change positions or rest.

So what's the difference between practice contractions and preterm labor contractions?

Preterm labor causes the cervix to change.

Here's how the preterm labor contractions may feel.

Preterm labor contractions feel strong—like a deep menstrual cramp.

And the contractions usually don't stop, even when you're resting. They're often regular and, when you time them, you are having at least 6 contractions within an hour—even when you rest, change positions, or drink fluids.

You may feel pressure in your pelvis or lower belly. It may even hurt when you press on your belly. And you'll have a dull ache in your lower back.

Other signs include vaginal bleeding or a sudden increase or change in vaginal discharge.

If you have any of these signs or if you feel that something is "off," call your doctor or midwife.

They may want to see you because they can't always tell what's happening over the phone.

One of the things they'll check is your cervix to see if it's changing.

And if you go in and it's not labor, and you're sent home, that's okay.

You should call your doctor or midwife if you notice that your baby has stopped moving or is moving less than normal. And call if your water breaks—this can feel like a sudden gush of fluid.

Now this video can't cover everything you may experience if you are in preterm labor, so trust yourself to ask questions or call for help.

Get emergency help if

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you have severe vaginal bleeding, severe pain in your belly or pelvis, or you see or feel the umbilical cord. Now it may help to know that preterm labor doesn't always mean you will have your baby early.

The contractions can stop on their own, or your care team may give you medicine to help slow down labor.

Remember, everyone's pregnancy and labor—even preterm labor—is unique. Your doctor or midwife is prepared and trained to do everything they can to care for you and safely deliver your baby.