

# Preterm Labor



## P a t i e n t I n f o r m a t i o n

Preterm labor occurs when labor starts before the 37th week of your pregnancy. Preterm Labor may begin like regular with light contractions that increase in length and strength over time. These contractions are often painless and may come every 15 minutes or less.

The cause of preterm labor is unknown. It can occur in active as well as inactive women during the first pregnancy or the fifth. In fact, half of all women who deliver early do not have any high risk factors. There is an increased risk for preterm labor in women who have had a previous preterm labor/delivery or are carrying more than one baby during pregnancy.

### **Warning Signs of Preterm Labor**

The onset of preterm labor can be very subtle and often difficult to recognize. During your pregnancy you may experience some or all of the signs and symptoms of preterm labor. These include:

**Increase Uterine Contractions** - What is a contraction? Contractions happen when the uterine muscle tightens and feels hard then it relaxes and feels soft. These contractions will come and go. You may or may not feel pain in your abdomen (belly), upper legs and lower back. Contractions happen normally in every pregnancy. Contractions that happen too often can lead to preterm labor and cause your baby to be born early.

What does a contraction feel like?

- Tighten your upper arm muscle and feel how hard it is
- Relax your muscle, now it is soft
- Feel the top of your belly (where the baby starts) while you are lying down on your side. If it is soft and you can easily press your fingertips in, your uterus is not contracting. If it is hard and you can not press your fingertips in, this is a contraction.

**Menstrual-Like Cramps** - May come and go or be constant. Usually felt in the lower abdomen and lower back.

**Low, Dull Backache** - Usually occurs in the lower back and may spread to the sides or front. Can also be constant or may come and go.

Pelvic Pressure - A pressure feeling in the lower abdomen, back or thighs. Sometimes described as "heaviness" in the lower abdomen.

Vaginal Discharge - An increase or change in your discharge, usually mucous or watery. It may be white, brown or red. If you have a gush of fluid through your vagina, your "Bag of Water" may have broken. Call your Doctor immediately if you have a gush of fluid or bright red bleeding.

A Sense of Something Is Not Right - Some times women have a feeling that things are not right, yet they are not able to tell exactly what is wrong or what they are feeling.

If you experience any of the above signs or symptoms call Biomedical Systems Perinatal Nurses or your Health Care Provider and carefully follow the instructions you are given. Preterm labor can not be predicted but with early detection it can often be slowed or stopped.

### **What Can You Do To Reduce the Risks of Preterm Labor?**

Increase Rest - Your Health Care Provider may instruct you to rest for one-hour periods twice daily. If more rest is needed, your provider may place you on bedrest. Bedrest is where your activity is limited to getting up to go to the bathroom and sitting up for meals. Resting on your side is helpful in keeping your uterus relaxed and making sure your baby gets the blood supply it needs. You can place pillows under your hips to raise them slightly higher than your head. This will help keep the pressure of your baby off of your cervix.

Decrease Strenuous Activity - Your Health Care Provider may tell you not to jog, exercise or make frequent trips up and down stairs. Heavy lifting and cleaning should be avoided as well.

Sexual Activity or "Pelvic Rest" - Your Health Care Provider may instruct you to limit or stop sexual activity.

Increase Fluid Intake - Your body needs more fluids while you are pregnant. You need to drink 8 - 8 ounces of water or juice per day. Avoid fluids with caffeine in them, these cause your uterus to be stimulated.

Keep Your Bladder Empty - If your bladder gets too full, this can cause your uterus to contract.

Take Your Medications As Ordered - Take the medication your Health Care Provider has instructed you to take. Most medications are meant to be taken around the clock. Be sure and ask your Health Care Provider if you have any questions on how to take your medication(s).