

Preparing for Labour

How Will You Know if You're in Labour?

It's easy to confuse early labour with active labour. In both, your contractions may be uncomfortable. But there are clear differences:

Early Labour	Active Labour
Contractions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not at regular intervals • vary in length • stay the same or become weaker • felt in the lower belly, may feel like menstrual cramps • most uncomfortable when you're moving, may decrease when you change position • still allow you to talk 	Contractions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • at regular intervals • become longer • become stronger • felt in the belly, lower back or thighs • continue whether you're moving or resting, may require you to stop and breathe • more difficult to talk • breathing through contractions becomes harder
Cervix is thinning ("effacing") and softening and remains closed or opens ("dilates") just a bit	Cervix continues to thin and opens
There may or may not be pinkish discharge ("show") or leaking from the amniotic sac as your water breaks	There may be "show" or leaking from the amniotic sac as your water breaks
Early labour can stop and start and can last from several hours to several days. If you're healthy and low-risk, being at home is usually best	Coping techniques don't work as well. You require more support



FAMILY STORY

The start of Michelle's labour was confusing. She was awake all Sunday night with contractions but then fell asleep in the morning and everything stopped. All day it was off and on. She was awake most of Monday night with contractions and a little bit of show. Again it stopped when she had breakfast and a bath. On Tuesday, she went to the hospital exhausted, and her son was born late that night.



TRY THIS

Take a shower. If it's early labour, your contractions will probably slow and get shorter. Or try sleeping or distracting yourself with another activity. If you can do either, it's also likely early labour. Getting rest now will help you build your energy for active labour.

Relaxing for Labour

Practise these techniques now so you'll know which will be the most helpful to you when labour begins:

Focal point concentration – Focus on something or someone other than the pain.

Visualization – Picture a place or a thing that makes you feel relaxed and safe.

Water therapy – Get in the bath or shower during early labour for rest and comfort. And remember to drink lots of water.

Massage – Between contractions, use light, even strokes on the belly, press on the lower back or squeeze and release tense areas. Have your partner massage you (be sure to tell them what's working for you) or do it yourself.

Complete relaxation – Gently tense and relax each part of your body in turn. Hold each muscle for 3 to 5 seconds. Breathe in as you tense and breathe out as you relax.



WHAT YOU CAN DO

Read through this section to learn how you can use things like massage to help your partner during labour. Practise relaxation and breathing techniques together throughout the pregnancy. During labour, encourage and praise your partner.

Breathing for Labour

Using breathing techniques during labour can help you relax, focus your attention, relieve your pain and keep oxygen flowing to you and your baby. There's no right or wrong way to breathe during labour. Try different ways to see what works for you.

Slow breathing – Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth at about half your normal speed. Keep your shoulders relaxed.

Light breathing – Take shallow breaths in and out through your mouth at about twice your normal speed. When a contraction starts to decrease, return to slow breathing. When it stops, take a deep breath. End with a relaxing sigh.

Short breath holding (second stage of labour) – Hold your breath briefly when you're pushing.

Panting (second stage of labour) – Lift your chin, keep your mouth slightly open, and breathe in and out lightly and quickly, like a dog panting. This will help you control the urge to push so your baby's head can come out gently.

What is counter pressure?

Firm, constant pressure applied to the lower back, hip or another painful area. Your partner can press with their hand (have them practise in advance) or you can lean against a rolled towel, a tennis ball or a wall.



TRY THIS

Think of preparing for labour like getting ready for a marathon: pace yourself, drink water and practise relaxing and breathing techniques ahead of time so you're ready when you need them.



Comfortable Positions for Labour

Try to keep moving and stay relaxed. And by staying upright, you'll help open your cervix and get your baby into the best position for birth.

First stage of labour:

Walking

Good for:

- moving the baby down in your pelvis
- relieving backache

Standing

Good for:

- relieving backache

Rock your hips, lean forward and rest on something or try counter pressure.

First and second stages of labour:

Sitting upright

Good for:

- relaxing your bottom for pushing
- providing a restful change from standing
- offering a comfortable position if you have electronic fetal monitoring

Try sitting on the toilet.

Semi-sitting

Good for:

- providing rest
- napping between contractions

Lean forward, rest on your partner and get a back rub.

Birthing Ball

Good for:

- moving your baby down in your pelvis

Lean on the ball while kneeling or sit on it while someone helps you keep your balance. Don't use a ball if you're slippery with oil or lotion.

Peanut Ball

Good for:

- moving your baby down in your pelvis

Use instead of a birthing ball if you are lying in bed to support you in different positions.



Kneeling ("all fours")

Good for:

- taking the pressure off hemorrhoids
- relieving backache
- moving your baby into the ideal birthing position

Lean forward on a chair or bed to lessen the strain on your hands and wrists. Try pelvic tilts. Kneel and lean on a support while your partner gives you a massage or uses counter pressure. Can also be done in the shower or on a yoga mat.

Side-lying

Good for:

- alternating with walking during the first stage of labour
- using during birth
- offering a safe position if you've taken pain medication or have an epidural
- taking the pressure off hemorrhoids and your bum

Be sure your upper leg is well supported so you can relax between contractions.

Squatting

Good for:

- moving the baby down in your pelvis

Ensure you have someone to support you. Use a squatting bar or stool. Or try leaning on a partner or having them wrap their arms around you to give your legs a rest. Keep your feet flat. Change positions between contractions. If you've had an epidural, squatting may not be safe.