

Signs that labour may start soon.

Labour is a natural, beautiful thing – and perhaps a little terrifying too. Understandably, because it's the great unknown. Even if you've been through it before, there's no guarantee this time will be the same as your previous experience.

Having your baby on their due date is rare: only about 1 in 20 people manage this. Usually, labour starts somewhere between 1 week before your due date and 2 weeks after it. If this is your first baby, the start of labour is normally gradual. It can last hours and stop and start over multiple days.

You know in the movies where a person's waters breaks, and suddenly they're in labour and having to rush to the hospital where she sneezes out a baby with a few high-pitched yells? Yeah, it doesn't quite happen like that - sorry! The start of labour is usually a slow lengthy process. You'll have plenty of time to talk to your LMC and go over things, you'll also probably hang out at home rather than dashing to the hospital straight away - this will benefit you in the long run.

Have you heard of Braxton Hicks contractions during your pregnancy, these are tightenings in your tummy for a few seconds- usually across the top half. This can happen from the middle of pregnancy and are considered 'practice' contractions. They do not mean you are in labour and are nothing to worry about. As the end of pregnancy approaches, Braxton Hicks contractions may become more powerful, so it's easy to mistake them for the start of labour. But the differences between Braxton Hicks contractions and labour contractions are, they are irregular and don't last very long - about 30 seconds. Although they can be uncomfortable, they aren't painful. and will stay the same over a period of time. Contact your LMC for advice if you're worried that the tightenings you're feeling might be the start of labour.

Your baby settles into a position ready for labour - more about baby's position another day. Babies move around a lot in your uterus during pregnancy but at some point in late pregnancy, your baby will get into position for birth. If this is your first baby, you may they are already in position by 35 weeks. The most common position for birth is head down with your baby's back facing outwards, which is called an anterior position. This is the ideal position for giving birth, because your baby may fit through your pelvis more easily. If your baby is head-down but facing your tummy, this is called the posterior position. Some midwives and antenatal educators believe that spending time leaning forwards (for example, being on your hands and knees or leaning forward over a beanbag or birth ball) can help encourage them to turn. Whether your baby turns or not, you may find it comfortable to be in this during late pregnancy and labour, so it's worth a try.

You have a 'show' at some stage. This has many names that I've heard over the years, such as the baby bung, the show, bloody show, mucus plug - whatever you decide to call it, every pregnant person has one. This is a small plug of mucus that blocks the entrance to your cervix (the neck of your uterus). As your cervix begins to stretch and get ready for the birth, this mucus plug starts to come away and you may notice it on your underwear or when wiping yourself after being to the bathroom. Nothing to be concerned about - it's a good sign that things are starting to happen. Your labour may not start for hours or even days after you lose the mucus plug

Your baby develops inside a bag of fluid called the amniotic sac. When your baby is ready to be born the sac breaks and the fluid comes out through your vagina. This is your waters breaking. Your waters may break at any time during labour. Some babies are even born in their waters - although this is rare. You may have a big gush of water or just a trickle, so you may not be sure whether your waters have broken or you've just wet yourself. If you think your waters have broken, contact your LMC as they may want to give you a check-up. It is a good idea to make a note of when your waters broke so you can tell your LMC. Tell your LMC straight away if the waters are smelly or have a greenish/blackish tinge to them or if you're losing blood. This could mean you and your baby need urgent attention. It may help to wear a sanitary pad (not a tampon) so you can show the midwife what's happening.

Sometimes your waters may break before you go into labour - approximately 15% of waters break before people are in labour, not like it does in movies - again, a bit of drama for TV! If your waters break before you are having contractions, you will most likely go into labour on your own within 24 hours. If this doesn't happen your LMC will suggest induction of labour and you'll be advised to give birth in hospital, if you're not there already. This is because your waters breaking before labour starts increases your baby's risk of infection.

Early labour is also called the latent phase - this is usually a long slow process. Signs to look out for that you might be in labour are, an achy, painful lower back, pain low down in your tummy that feels like period pain and cramps. Irregular contractions or tightenings which may stop and start and over a period of time settle into a regular pattern. Some people have an upset tummy or loose bowels - Yay!?

You might think that once you're in labour, it's all action. In fact, it can still be a wee while until you meet your baby. So, the best thing to do is relax, rest and stay calm to help you prepare for the work ahead. We will cover labour in another of my weekly columns.

