

Keep Calm and Labor On!

Know what to expect in early labor



Oh baby! You just had your first contraction.

Is this it? Should you grab your birthing bag and head out?

You may be in early labor — the phase that comes before active labor.

WHAT HAPPENS IN EARLY LABOR?¹

- Hormonal changes continue to prepare mom and baby for birth and breastfeeding
- Pre-labor (irregular on and off contractions that occur during the last weeks of pregnancy) gradually gives way to early labor
- Contractions may start and stop several times before developing a rhythm
- Contractions generally start off mild, may last 30-45 seconds and occur every 20 minutes or so apart, then become longer, stronger and closer together
- Cervix dilates to 6 cm to prepare for childbirth as the baby moves down into your pelvis²
- Early labor is most often the longest phase, more than half of the total labor time



DID YOU KNOW?

The average length of early labor is 6-12 hours for first-time moms (early labor is usually shorter for experienced moms).⁷

It may even last 24 hours or more, which can be perfectly normal.

THERE ARE BENEFITS TO STAYING HOME DURING LABOR AS LONG AS POSSIBLE:



Gives you more **flexibility** to move freely—which can **reduce** the risk of medical interventions³



Helps **increase** the labor hormone, oxytocin—which **allows** the cervix to thin and open⁴

HOW CAN YOUR PARTNER OR DOULA SUPPORT YOU?



Offering comfort, physical care and reassurance



Helping time contractions – Lamaze's *Pregnancy to Parenting* app has a contraction counter



Keeping your mind off labor with simple activities, like playing games

STAY COMFORTABLE BY⁵:



Resting and relaxing



Drinking plenty of fluids and eating what appeals to you



Going for a short walk



Moving around or changing positions



Focusing on slow, deep breathing



Using a warm pad or ice pack on your lower back



Reading a good book or watching TV



Asking your doula or partner for a gentle massage



HOW DO I KNOW WHEN TO GO?

Active labor begins when contractions are roughly 3-5 minutes apart, last 1 minute and have been that way for 1-2 hours.⁶

However, listen to your body. If you feel it's time to go to your birthing facility, follow that instinct and/or call your care provider first-especially if your water breaks.

Learn more about early labor in a Lamaze class, in-person or [online](https://www.lamaze.org/pushforyourbaby), so you can be prepared!

PUSH FOR THE SAFEST, HEALTHIEST BIRTH POSSIBLE. VISIT [WWW.LAMAZE.ORG/PUSHFORYOURBABY](https://www.lamaze.org/pushforyourbaby) TO LEARN MORE.

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Push
for your baby

^{1,6} Lothian, J.A., McGrath, K. (2012, April 24). Your step-by-step guide to giving birth. [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.lamaze.org/StagesOfLabor>

² American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine. Safe prevention of the primary cesarean delivery. Obstetric Care Consensus No. 1. American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology (2014): 123:693-711. doi: 10.1097/01.AOG.0000444441.04111.1d

³ Regan, M., McElroy, K., Iobst, S., and Lothian, J. (2015). Optimizing childbirth outcomes through adoption of healthy birth practices.

⁴ Childbirth Connection. (April 2011). Understanding & Navigating the Maternity Care System. Retrieved from <http://www.childbirthconnection.org/article.asp?ck=10184#oxytocin>

⁵ March of Dimes. (May 2014). Vaginal birth – Stages of labor. Retrieved from <http://www.marchofdimes.org/pregnancy/stages-of-labor.aspx>

⁷ Mayo Clinic. (2013, July 18). Labor and delivery, postpartum care - Stages of labor: Baby, it's time! Retrieved from <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/labor-and-delivery/in-depth/stages-of-labor/art-20046545>