



EARLY LABOUR

What do I need to know?

What are early and active labour?

Early labour is the beginning of the labour process. Your cervix begins to open (this is called dilation) and gets thinner and softer (this is called effacement). During early labour, your cervix will open up from zero to six centimetres, and dilation often occurs slowly. **Active labour** starts at 6 cm cervical dilation. In this stage, your cervix will open up from 6 to 10 cm, and dilation often happens faster.



Cervix is not effaced or dilated



Cervix is effaced and 1 cm dilated



Cervix is effaced and 6 cm dilated



Cervix is fully dilated at 10 cm

What happens in early labour?

Every labour is unique, and each experience can be different, even for the same person. In early labour, you will usually start to feel contractions (tightening and relaxing of the uterus). The timing of contractions will vary, and they may stop for a while, then begin again.

Other signs of early labour include:



Mucus discharge

in your underwear (this can be pink, bloody or jelly-like, or sometimes a large, solid mass or mucus "plug")



Back pain



Feeling the baby lower down in your pelvis



Loose, watery poop



An increased need to pee



How long does early labour last?

For many people, early labour is the longest stage, as much as two-thirds of the entire process. It may take several hours or even days before active labour starts. Early labour typically lasts longer if it's your first time giving birth.

If your water breaks during early labour, follow the specific advice given by your midwife.

How do I know if it's early and not active labour?

It can be hard to tell the difference between early and active labour, especially if this is your first time in labour. Contractions can feel different for everyone.

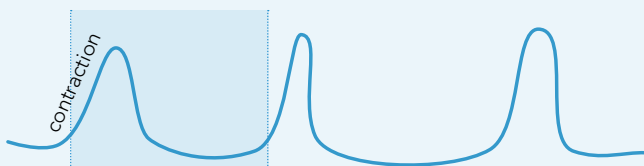
During early labour, contractions may:

- Last for less than one minute.
- Last for longer than one minute but feel mild.
- Be spaced close together but then stop for a while.
- Feel like strong menstrual cramps.
- Feel like an ache or pressure.
- Be so intense that you need to focus on your breathing.

Contractions in active labour:

- Will be more intense and regular: consistently three to four minutes apart, lasting for 60 seconds each, and that pattern continues for more than one hour.
- You may become more serious and focused, less talkative, especially during contractions.

EARLY LABOUR



ACTIVE LABOUR



Contractions are timed from the beginning of one to the beginning of the next

Keep in mind that everyone's labour is different.

It can progress more quickly if you have been in labour before. If this is not your first baby, your midwife may ask you to contact them when your contractions are five minutes apart.

What should I do in early labour?

You can try these suggestions to help you cope:



Distract yourself: Watch a movie, call a friend or listen to music.



Keep moving: Go for a walk or continue with your usual daily activities.



Rest: Sleep if you can or lie down.



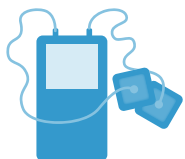
Eat or drink: Staying hydrated and nourished is important. You likely won't feel like eating when you are in active labour, so having small meals or snacks in early labour can help.



Take a shower or bath: This can help you relax. Sometimes contractions can slow down or stop in water, and this is perfectly normal. It means that you are still in the early stage of labour.

What comfort measures can I use in early labour?

There are lots of tools you can use to feel more comfortable. Before labour, think about what strategies you might like to try. Talk to your midwife and your other support people about whether they have any supplies for you to use. Some methods include:



TENS,

a small device that sends low-intensity electrical charges across the skin for pain relief and distraction



Aromatherapy

(e.g., essential oils)



Touch

(e.g. massage or acupressure)



Breathing exercises,

mindfulness techniques and cultural, religious or traditional practices



Position changes

(e.g., sitting on an exercise ball, hands and knees, lying on your side)



Tylenol or Gravel

(available over the counter without a prescription)



If none of these tools work, your midwife may suggest other pain relief methods. They will work with you to find the best option for your situation.

What are the positives of staying at home in early labour?

Most people benefit from spending early labour at home or in another place that feels relaxing and peaceful.

Those in early labour who stay out of the hospital have a lower chance of medical interventions, such as C-sections.

There may be situations where you cannot stay at home during early labour. In these cases, your midwife will talk to you about what to do.



Control your environment: dim the lights or play music



A comfortable and familiar environment



Access to your own bed, shower or bath



Eat and drink as you like



Move around and find comfortable positions



More space for your support people

When should I call my midwife?

Your midwife will let you know when to contact them. Typically, you should wait until you think you are in active labour before you call your midwife. However, if something doesn't feel right, or if you are unsure or concerned or have questions, contact your midwife.

Contact your midwife right away if you have any of these symptoms:



- Fresh, bright red bleeding in your underwear that is not mucus-like or pink
- A fever of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher
- Sudden or severe headache
- Changes in your vision (e.g., blurred vision, seeing spots or auras)
- Severe nausea and/or vomiting
- A decrease in your baby's movement

What can I expect from my midwife in early labour?

During pregnancy, you should talk with your midwife about what care will look like during early labour and who can help support you during this time, including your partner, family and friends or a professional like a doula.

When you contact your midwife for the first time in early labour, they may talk to you on the phone and ask about your contractions. In some cases, they may also come to your home to assess you.

If you are not in active labour when your midwife assesses you, they will typically say that you may stay at home. It's not uncommon to have more than one early labour assessment, especially if this is your first baby.

Your midwife will talk to you about when to check in again. Ask them:

- *What can I expect next?*
- *When should I contact you again?*

When will my midwife stay with me?

If you're having a home birth, your midwife will typically stay with you at home once you are in active labour.

If you're planning to deliver at a birth centre or hospital, you'll usually leave home to meet your midwife once you are in active labour.

Further resources

For more information on early labour, download the AOM's early labour app. The app includes more information on early labour, including videos about different comfort measures and a contraction timer. Available on the App Store and Google Play.

Do you need more information?

Share your questions, concerns and ideas with your midwife. You can note them below, on a separate piece of paper or on your phone.
