

First and Second Stages of Labor



Stages of labor defined

- First: Dilation phase. Contractions pull the cervix up, to open it to 10 cm.
- Second: Pushing phase. 10 cm, pushing the baby, and delivery of baby.
- Third: Placental delivery. From delivery of baby to delivery of placenta.
- Fourth: Stabilization of mom and baby. First 2 hours or until stable.

You may be approaching labor if:

- Backache
- Soft stools and flu-like symptoms
- Burst of energy, “nesting”
- You may also experience “lightening” as baby drops lower and you can breathe better, increased waddling as baby descends, and loss of memory or spaciness
- You have some dilation and effacement. We feel these internally at one of your exams, if you request it. You may be dilated and/or effaced for days or weeks before going into labor.

Signs of labor

- Loss of mucus plug, “bloody show”, can happen before labor starts or during labor.
- Rupture of membranes (ROM), “water breaks”: the amniotic sac breaks, releasing fluid. The baby’s head drops farther down in the pelvis and contractions get stronger or start. Call me if you suspect ROM! Be sure to note the color and amount of fluid, and the time.

Warm-up labor (“false” labor, pre-labor, latent labor, or prodromal labor, which all do lots of work)

- The uterus begins contracting but does not progress to become more regular or stronger. The contractions are light, like menstrual cramps, with a variable and irregular pattern, and may be short (about 30 seconds) and far apart. They may be felt in your low back as a dull ache that comes and goes, or low in front as cramps or twinges in your cervix.
- You may have “bloody show” or lose your mucus plug.
- Try to rest, eat well, drink plenty of fluids. Latent labor can continue for hours, days, or weeks. You want to be rested and hydrated when active labor starts.
- Latent labor will often stop in a bath or with a small glass of alcohol; active labor will not. Epsom salts in the bath will help to relax your muscles, so you can tell the difference.
- If it is nighttime and you have these light, irregular contractions, call me in the morning. If it is daytime, please give me a courtesy call to let me know so that I can change plans if needed to stay readily available to jump in my car and come when you need me.
- When the contractions progress to 5-7 minutes apart and last about 1 minute, then you are getting into active labor. Call me and let me know, please do not wait!
- You will also want to notify your support team if you are planning for one; friends, relatives, or doula (people who will be there for the sole reason of making it easier for you).

Active labor

- Consists of regular contractions less than 7 minutes apart that last about 1 minute. This is the “first stage” of labor. It will not stop with a warm Epsom salt bath or a nap.
- It gets harder to talk through contractions and they are definitely more painful. You need to find breathing patterns and other coping mechanisms that work for you. These contractions are manageable, especially with all of the endorphins your body will start producing.
- Remember to drink water frequently, eat whatever you can hold down, and urinate hourly.
- You might like a hot shower, a walk outside, hot or cold compresses, being alone, having company, being with your partner, back or foot massage, or back pressure (from partner) during contractions. Sleep if you possibly can, and save your energy for the birth!
- Relaxation is necessary in order for your hormones to do their job, and create endorphins for pain relief. Visualization exercises or remembering good times together is helpful.
- Realize that labor is unlikely to be just what you imagined; try to minimize your expectations, take care of your body’s needs and let go of the process.

Transition

- This is the part of labor they love to show in sit-coms, and never in a realistic way.
- It can be a very emotional time and many women say, “I can’t do this!” Many spend it on the toilet because it is safe, allows good pelvic relaxation. In transition, you can get shaky, hot, cold, scared, tired, or energized. Endorphins which reduce pain can also make you feel tired and disoriented, so remember that this is actually a good sign, and not a reason to panic! It may become difficult to talk, because labor takes all of your concentration.
- At this point we would not make it to the hospital before the baby arrives.

Second stage

- This is pushing! Technically, it is from 10 cm dilatation to arrival of baby. Be gentle.
- Pushing often feels good because you get to work with the contractions and feel progress.
- Relax; the uterus is doing all of the effective pushing, especially for second time moms.
- There are lots of helpful positions; squatting, semi-sitting, tub, stool, ball, hands-knees.
- The head descends down the vaginal canal, stretching tissues as it goes, which may feel like burning; do not fight against this, just relax and let baby out. Stretching occurs bit by bit as the head descends, retracts, descends further, etc. This can be frustrating to the mother but it is protective of her and her baby. You can touch the baby’s head now.
- “Crowning” is when the largest diameter of the head comes through and the head doesn’t retract at all. This is the greatest stretching. Often I will ask you to pant and not push, to allow for a slow gentle delivery of the head and prevention of tears, best for you and baby.
- Once the head is out, I check for the cord (which is common, not an emergency). Then I help guide the top and bottom shoulders out and the rest of the body follows in one swoop. Dad is welcome to help, or to do this part himself - I will talk him through it! Then baby goes right up to mom’s abdomen/breasts.
- The room needs to be kept warm (about 75 degrees) to help the baby stay warm. Mom is the best heater for baby, who needs to be on mom’s chest, skin-to-skin for the first hour.
- It is very important for baby to hear mom’s voice, then dad’s voice, so quiet is encouraged.

See the sheet on “Third stage of labor” for info on getting the placenta out.