

# PRETERM LABOR

## What is preterm labor?

In most pregnancies, labor starts between 37 and 42 weeks after a woman's last menstrual period. If labor begins before 37 weeks, it is called preterm labor. Labor often begins with regular contractions of the uterus and the cervix dilating (or opening up) and effacing (or thinning out). Sometimes a woman's bag of water breaks before the uterus has begun contracting. It is believed that hormones from the pregnant mother, placenta, and baby work together to start the labor process. There are many factors involved in preterm labor. In most cases of preterm labor, the exact cause is unknown.

## Why the concern about preterm labor?

The growth and development that occurs in the last few weeks of pregnancy are very important to the baby's health. Babies who are born prematurely are more likely to have health problems with their eyes, ears, breathing/respiratory, nervous system, and growth.

## What are the warning signs of preterm labor?

- Change in type of vaginal discharge (watery, mucus, or bloody)
- More vaginal discharge than normal
- Pelvic, lower abdominal, or vaginal pressure
- Constant low back pain
- Abdominal cramps, with or without diarrhea
- Contractions or tightening of your lower abdomen
- Bag of waters breaks (can be a large gush or a small trickle)

## Who is at risk for having preterm labor?

Women who have had preterm labor before and those who have had little or no prenatal care are at increased risk for preterm labor with the current pregnancy. Smoking cigarettes and using certain illicit drugs such as cocaine also increases the risk. Sometimes women who have had an infection in pregnancy, have an abnormal cervix, or are underweight also have an increased risk for preterm labor. However, preterm labor can also occur without warning.

It is normal for women to have Braxton-Hicks contractions which may be painful and regular during the third trimester. Usually these contractions will stop within an hour or if you rest and drink some water. However, if you have **4 contractions in 20 minutes or 8 contractions in an hour, contact your midwife**. If you have any of the preterm labor signs listed above or have any concerns, contact your midwife.