

LABOUR PAINS – TRUE OR FALSE ?



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Identifying Labour Pains

Congratulations! You are now approaching the Big Day! If this is your first pregnancy, there must be so many doubts regarding the delivery going through your mind. Foremost amongst them will be, “How do I know whether I’m in labour or not?” Well, this is where we come in. We are going to help you identify and recognise the different types of pain you might experience.

Types of Labour Pains

During the last eight weeks of your pregnancy, you may experience some irregular contractions or tightening of your uterus. This is fairly common. It is the uterus warming up and doing a ‘trial run’ before the grand finale – the arrival of your baby!

The contractions begin at the top and slowly spread downwards. They can last from 30 seconds to over two minutes. If you walk about or change your position, these contractions may decrease and even disappear altogether. That’s why these are known as ‘false’ labour or Braxton-Hicks contractions.

Remember, in true labour, the pain does not disappear by changing position; instead the contractions become more intense and occur more frequently.

Sometimes you may hear people use some technical terms with which you are not familiar. Do not be alarmed if you don’t know what they mean. Some of the more common ones are explained below.

A “Bloody Show”

As the mouth of the cervix begins to open in readiness for the delivery, the mucous plug that seals the opening of the uterus, slides out through the vagina. You may notice a blood-tinged mucous discharge. This is sometimes referred to as “bloody show”. This may happen a couple of days before the onset of labour and indicates that the cervix is dilating and getting ready for labour.

Your “Waters Have Broken”

All through your pregnancy, your baby has been floating in a sac containing amniotic fluid. This fluid acts like a cushion, protecting the fetus. When the baby is ready to be born, the membranes holding the amniotic sac start to rupture. This can happen suddenly, making the waters gush out, or it can happen slowly, allowing the waters to trickle out. This is referred to as the “breaking of waters”.

The first contractions normally start a few hours after the waters break. However, this is not a hard and fast rule. For some women, the waters can break during or before the onset of labour.

Commencement of Real Labour

Labour begins when the uterus starts contracting regularly. Usually, labour pains start at the lower back, move forwards towards the top of the uterus and embrace the rest of the abdomen. If the contractions are coming more frequently, and if they are getting progressively more intense, then you can be fairly sure that these are true labour pains. You must time your contractions. If your contractions are over 40 seconds long and are coming 3 in every 10 minutes, then it is the true labour. Also, remember true labour pains cannot be relieved by a change in position.

However, there is no need to panic about not reaching the hospital on time. If this is your first pregnancy, the contractions can last for many hours. For subsequent pregnancies, of course, the time is much shorter.

Early Stages of Labour

The initial contractions may not be very noticeable but they will gradually increase in intensity. The contractions usually last for about 30–45 seconds and are quite mild and irregular, ranging anywhere between 5–20 minutes apart. Although these early contractions carry on for a long time, they are not very intense. You can try to minimise the discomfort by walking around and sitting

across a chair. When you walk about, the downward force of gravity assists the baby's head to descend. Walking also helps to increase the efficiency of contractions and lessens discomfort, particularly if you lean forward against a support with each contraction.

Sitting upright and leaning forward on a firm chair is also very comfortable, especially since your back can also be easily massaged by your companion. Kneeling, squatting and going down on all fours are also some other positions that may help to make you more comfortable. Please note that you should NOT lie on your back as this may reduce blood supply to your baby.

You should now start preparing yourself to come to the hospital. You can eat a light snack if you are hungry, but avoid having a heavy meal as it will lead to more discomfort later.

Regardless of the status of your contractions, you MUST come to the hospital immediately, for any of the following emergency reasons:

Reasons for coming to the hospital on an “emergency” basis

- Fresh bleeding (like menstrual blood) with or without any pain
- Decreased movements of your baby
- Waters have broken
- Actual labour pains have started

When you come to the hospital please bring your ID card and all relevant papers and contact the IP Desk. You can also bring with you a small bag containing your toiletries and other necessities in case you have to be admitted immediately.

You will be escorted to the Labour Ward. The doctor on duty will examine you and assess whether you need to be admitted or not. This will be decided in consultation with the doctor whom you have been seeing on earlier antenatal visits. You and your baby will be appropriately monitored and you will be informed of the progress of labour.