

Signs of Labour and When to Come to Hospital

Royal Hospital for Women

January 2018

Before Labour Begins - Pre-Labour

Almost all first-time mothers worry about going into labour – how they will know and how they will feel. Relax, there are signs to let you know that your body is preparing itself for the birth and that labour is becoming closer. You may notice that:

- Your baby's head may engage, or move into the pelvis 3-4 weeks before the baby is due for women having their first baby. Women having second or subsequent babies may not experience this until labour begins. This change in baby's position will ease the pressure on your lungs and stomach so you should be able to breathe more easily and heartburn will ease off. You will feel more pressure on your bladder and you may need to go to the toilet more often.
- Once your baby has engaged, it won't be able to move as much and you may not feel kicks as vigorously but your baby's individual movement pattern should not change. Even so, you should still be able to feel at least 10 movements over a two hour period when your baby is normally active. It is not unusual to feel 10 movements in a very short space of time. If you are concerned about your baby's movement pattern, please ring Delivery Suite or your Midwife.
- The tightenings or Braxton Hicks contractions become more frequent and evident. As the uterus prepares itself for labour the muscles contract and relax more frequently. The contractions may stop you doing what you are doing, but when you relax they will stop.
- The mucus plug which seals the cervix may come away. This is called a show. The show normally looks like a gelatinous (jelly-like) plug, but it can be confused with the increased vaginal mucus experienced at the end of pregnancy. The show may be blood stained (pink or brownish).
- You feel an urge to clean the house or the cupboards - the nesting instinct is quite common.
- You may have diarrhoea or soft bowel motions – this is nature's way of clearing your bowel.
- Your caregiver may notice that your cervix has begun to ripen or soften, if he / she does a vaginal examination when you have a check-up.

During these final weeks you may like to catch up on friends, walk, swim or organise an outing or a special dinner. It is a time to enjoy.

Please remember that:

If at any time you are unsure, or concerned about anything:

Phone the Delivery Suite on 0439 869 035 or your MGP Midwife.

Your suitcase/ bag should be packed.

Signs of True/Established Labour

- **Labour usually starts with contractions.** Early contractions can be mild, felt in the abdomen, groin, or lower back and they can be similar to Braxton Hicks contractions. They may not come at regular intervals, but rather as a period cramp or low backache.

True labour contractions are strong, regular and they become more painful as labour becomes established. Walking around will make them stronger and they will not disappear when you lie down.

- **Waters breaking.** For the past nine months your baby has been protected within a sac of amniotic fluid. Many women fear that their waters will break while they're out, but only 10 per cent of women experience a slow leak or a sudden gush of amniotic fluid as the first sign of labour. If it does happen doesn't panic as it can be hours before your uterine contractions begin and it is the contractions which cause the dilatation of the cervix.

You should ring the Delivery Suite or your MGP Midwife if your waters break, or even if you are uncertain. Amniotic fluid should be clear, or a light straw colour, and it has a very sweet, inoffensive smell. Occasionally the fluid can be greenish-brown in colour – this is called meconium stained liquor and it means your baby has passed meconium/bowel motion in the amniotic fluid. If you have meconium stained liquor you will be asked to remain in hospital so your baby's heart rate can be monitored closely. For most women contractions will begin within 24 hours of their waters breaking.

When to Come to Hospital

For Women Expecting Their First Baby

If you are close to term, (i.e. greater than 37 weeks), we recommend that you come to the hospital:-

- When you are having contractions which are regular and strong and lasting 60 seconds and have been like this for at least an hour. At this time most women will find the contractions are about 2-3 minutes apart; **OR**
- When your membranes have ruptured. This could be a slight trickle or a sudden gush; **OR**
- If you have any bright bleeding, which is heavier than a normal "show".

If you are **37 weeks or less** we advise that you call the hospital as soon as you have any signs of labour, i.e. contractions, ruptured membranes, or vaginal bleeding.

For Women Who Already Have Children

All of the above applies, **except** that you are advised to call the hospital when your contractions are 5-7 minutes apart.

Contact Delivery Suite on 0439 869 035 or your MGP Midwife prior to coming in to the hospital.

Endorsed 12 January 2018. Should you wish to discuss any aspect of this information please send an email RHWfeedback@sesiahs.health.nsw.gov.au