



**DRAFT**  
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**NHS**

NHS Foundation Trust

Patient information service  
**Maternity**

# Latent phase of labour – ideas to help you





# **The three stages of labour**

Labour has three stages:

- the first stage, when the neck of the womb (cervix) opens to 10 centimetres
- the second stage, when the baby moves down through the vagina and is born
- the third stage, when the afterbirth (placenta) is delivered.

**Labour is a journey, which can take a long time.**

**Every woman's labour is different.**

**This leaflet gives you lots of suggestions to help with labour, especially the early part of the first stage.**

## What is the latent (early) phase of labour?

The latent phase of labour is the beginning of your labour – the early part of the first stage.

Before labour starts, the neck of the womb (cervix) is long, firm and closed, but even before labour begins, the cervix can be drawn up and get thinner.



**Closed cervix**



**Cervix drawn up and thinner**

During the 'latent' phase, the neck of the womb thins and opens (dilates) up to four centimetres.



**Neck of the womb (cervix) dilated up to four centimetres**

The next part of labour is called the active phase, and it is when we say labour has become established. Both the latent and the active phases take place during the first stage of labour. Eventually, at the end of the first stage, the cervix has opened to 10 centimetres and is described as being 'fully dilated'.



**Cervix fully dilated**

# What happens during the latent part of the first stage?

Before labour starts, the neck of the womb is long and firm. During the latent phase, the muscles of the uterus (womb) contract and make the cervix become flat and soft, at the same time as opening it to four centimetres. This flattening is called 'cervical effacement' or 'thinning'.

Some women have a very quick latent phase, but it typically lasts anywhere between four and 24 hours. In some women it may last several days. Some women can feel backache or cramps during this phase. Some women have bouts of contractions lasting a few hours, which then stop and start up again the next day. **This is normal.**

'Braxton Hicks' contractions happen throughout pregnancy. They are tightenings of the muscle of the uterus that last for about 30 seconds and are usually painless.

**Remember – the latent phase of labour can last a very long time, especially for first time mums.**

In the latent phase of labour, contractions may start and stop. They may continue for several hours but not become longer or stronger, staying at about 30 to 40 seconds long. This is normal.

If your contractions stop, it is a good time to rest and make sure you have something to eat. When your body has built up some energy supplies, your contractions will start again. Many women find that having a vaginal examination during the latent phase may stop their contractions for a few hours.

**This 'start-stop' pattern is common in the latent phase.**

In the active phase of labour, contractions become regular and longer, stronger and closer together until the baby is born.

# What can I do in the latent phase of labour?

It is not possible to say when active labour will begin. It could start in a couple of hours or in several days, so try to stay as relaxed as you can and distract yourself from focusing only on the contractions. It is a good idea for you to stay at home for as long as you feel comfortable. This is because there is evidence that the further on in labour you are when you come in to hospital, the more likely you are to have a normal birth. You are also far more likely to remain relaxed in your own home. You can call for advice at any time.

## There are things you can do to help yourself, such as:

- pottering around the house
- taking a walk
- watching a DVD
- taking a warm bath or shower
- having a nap
- if it's night time, trying to sleep as much as you can
- eating and drinking normally – being well-hydrated and having food energy on board can help labour become established
- doing some relaxation
- keeping your breathing controlled and calm
- asking your partner or labour supporter to give you a massage
- putting a hot water bottle or heat pack on any areas that

ache – your lower back, your tummy (under the bump) or between your thighs. Wrap it in a small towel first

- trying a soft gel sports injury pack that you have cooled in the freezer – this can help with backache
- keeping as mobile as you can, while remembering to save your energy for the active part of labour
- trying out different positions and using a birthing ball to find which positions are most comfortable
- drink an adequate amount of fluids – water, sports drinks and apple juice are all good
- eating little and often – carbohydrates (bread, pasta, rice, cereal) for slow-release energy, plus sugary foods for quick-release energy
- making love – kissing, cuddling and having an orgasm all cause your body to produce oxytocin. This is the hormone that is also produced in labour, and which makes the uterus contract
- using a TENS machine
- having a bath or shower, or getting in the birthing pool if you are already in hospital
- taking simple pain relief tablets such as paracetamol. Remember though, you should not take codeine or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen in pregnancy
- experimenting with positions that you find comfortable. There are advantages to staying upright and mobile in labour. This can mean standing, sitting, squatting, kneeling



and walking around. You may find a birthing ball, a floor mat or a beanbag useful. If you are tired, you could try resting on your left side, or sitting backwards on a kitchen-type chair leaning over the backrest – you might need pillows to rest against.

Choose a supportive birthing partner who can be with you throughout your labour. Some women choose to have the support of more than one person. Your birth supporters can encourage and reassure you, and help to tell your midwife what you would like.

**They can help with things such as:**

- massage
- keeping you active
- getting you drinks
- praising and encouraging you
- giving you cuddles
- reminding you to go to the toilet regularly to pass urine, as a full bladder can slow down your labour
- keeping you company, and even trying to make you laugh!

Don't forget that you can phone at any time if you have concerns about what is happening, or if you simply need some reassurance; we're very happy to listen to you and give you advice.

You should definitely phone the hospital if you think your waters have broken, if you get any bleeding from your vagina, if you are worried about your baby's movements, or if your contractions have become longer, stronger and closer together.

Please use the telephone number on the front of your notes to contact the hospital.

**Remember – labour is a journey, and the early part of the first stage can take a long time.**

**This is normal.**

**Quick labours are not always the easiest to cope with!**

**We hope that using some of the tips in this leaflet will help you through your labour.**

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**NHS Smokefree on 0300 123 1044.**

Drinkline is the national alcohol helpline. If you're worried about your own or someone else's drinking, you can call this free helpline in complete confidence.  
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For an interpreter or signer please contact the telephone number on your appointment letter.



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