

Signs and symptoms of preterm labour

What is preterm Labour?

Preterm or early labour means going into labour before 37 weeks. After this point, your pregnancy is classed as full term.

About 8 babies out of every 100 in the UK are born before the 37th week of pregnancy.

This leaflet will explain the signs and symptoms of premature labour.

If you think you may be going into early labour, call the hospital straight away/immediately for advice.



What are the signs and symptoms of preterm labour?

If you have any of the following symptoms, call/tell the hospital straight away/immediately, because you could be in labour:

- regular contractions or tightenings.
- period-type pains or pressure in your vaginal area
- a “show” - when the plug of mucus that has sealed the cervix during pregnancy comes away and out of the vagina
- a gush or trickle of fluid from your vagina – this could be your waters breaking
- backache that's not usual for you

Preterm labour may feel similar to normal labour or it may be faster or less painful, particularly if very preterm.



Call/tell the hospital straight away/ immediately if:

- you are bleeding
- your baby is moving less than usual
- your waters have broken and they are smelly or coloured

Braxton Hicks

Many women and birthing people experience Braxton Hicks, sometimes known as practice contractions.

These can become quite strong during the third trimester (after 28 weeks), and it's easy to mistake them for the real thing.

They are usually not painful, so it is important to get checked in hospital if you are having painful contractions.

What happens at the hospital?

The doctor or midwife at the hospital will offer to examine you and offer you tests to find out if:

- your waters have broken
- you're in labour
- you have an infection

These tests may include:

- a vaginal examination to check if your cervix is opening
- blood tests to check for infection
- urine tests to check for infection (or protein for pre-eclampsia)
- a check of your pulse, blood pressure and temperature
- feeling your bump to check the baby's position
- swabs for infections such as bacterial vaginosis and group B strep
- monitoring and recording any contractions
- a check of your baby's heartbeat
- a vaginal swab (such as a fetal fibronectin test) to see if your body is preparing to give birth

You should be given all the information you need and have your questions answered to enable you to make informed decision about your care.

Your baby's movements

You should continue to feel your baby move in the pattern that is normal for you right up to the time you go into labour and during labour.

Call your hospital immediately if you think your baby's movements have slowed down, stopped or changed

What happens if I am in preterm labour?

The midwife or doctor will talk to you about whether it's best to birth your baby now (either by vaginal delivery or caesarean section) or try to slow down labour using medication. They will consider:

- how many weeks pregnant you are
- you and your baby's health
- what neonatal facilities are available and whether you need to be moved to another hospital
- what you want to do.

You may need to be moved to a hospital that has facilities for premature babies.

Right place of Birth

When a baby is born preterm, they need special care in hospital because they are not quite ready for life outside the womb. In some circumstances a preterm baby is better born in a tertiary unit that gives specialised care.

Our local tertiary units are the Norfolk and Norwich University hospital and The Rosie in Cambridge.

However it may be necessary to transfer you to a tertiary unit further away if the local unit is full, and does not have enough cots to care for your baby or babies.



What happens if I'm not in labour?

If labour hasn't started, your healthcare professional will investigate what may be causing your symptoms and if you and your baby would benefit from further treatment.

It might be recommended that you stay in hospital so they can monitor you and your baby.

In 7 out of 10 cases, the symptoms go away and women give birth at term (after 37 weeks).

More than 9 out of 10 women do not give birth within 14 days of having these symptoms.

Where can I get more information?

**Tommy's
Pregnancy Hub:
Preterm Birth**



**NHS England:
Preterm Birth**



**NICE Guidance:
Preterm Birth**



If you have any of the signs and symptoms of preterm labour, please contact the hospital you have booked your pregnancy with on the following numbers to get advice:

Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital

Please call the Macleod Maternity Assessment Unit (MMAU) on 01603 287328

Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Kings Lynn

Please call Maternity Triage on 01553 214829

James Paget University Hospital

Please call the Delivery Suite on 01493 452480 or 452190

