

The latent phase (early stage) of labour

An information guide



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What is the latent phase of labour?

The latent phase is the time when changes in your body start happening in preparation for actual labour.

It is difficult to describe because it varies so much from woman to woman, however, it is generally described as a period of time, not necessarily continuous, where you may experience painful contractions which have the effect of softening and thinning and opening your cervix.

Although these contractions may feel painful they are not yet regular in strength, length or frequency.

For example you may get a cluster of contractions in a period of ten minutes – but then no further pains for the next ten minutes, they may even stop altogether and start again the next day.

This is nature's way of giving you time to rest. These contractions can last for hours or days prior to labour starting properly, especially if this is your first baby.

Although this can be frustrating and tiring these contractions play an essential role in softening and preparing the cervix for real labour.

How will I know when I am established in labour?

You will know!

When labour is fully established the contractions become rhythmical and continue to increase in length, strength and frequency until you have given birth.

When should I ring the hospital?

If your pregnancy has been quite normal, you should ring when:

- Your contractions are regular and increasing in length, strength and frequency. As a guide you should be having three contractions in each ten minute period
- If your waters break
- You may see some blood tinged sticky mucus coming from your vagina also called 'a show'. This is quite normal, but if the blood loss is more than a streak call in immediately
- If you are concerned about your baby's movements
- If you are worried about anything. We are always available for a chat and to provide reassurance.

Coping strategies for the latent phase

The best place for you during the latent phase is in the comfort of your own home surrounded by your favourite things and your favourite people. This is why the midwife may encourage you to stay at home or return home if you have come into hospital a little too soon.

It is very important that you achieve a calm, tranquil environment for labour to progress well. Your birth partner can be very helpful during this stage, perhaps by running a bath, keeping you fed and hydrated, giving a gentle massage and generally encouraging you and keeping you company.

Here are some tips which midwives and researchers have found to be helpful during the latent phase

- Eat little and often to maintain energy levels. High carbohydrate low fat foods such as pasta, bread, cereals, bananas and sweet foods will give you an energy boost
- Drink plenty of fluids to keep you hydrated. If you don't eat and drink your labour will not progress well
- Keep moving and maintain an upright position if possible to allow gravity to aid the baby's head down into the pelvis and to press onto the cervix to encourage it to thin out and dilate
- Do something to distract yourself
- Go for a gentle walk then have a rest
- Try different positions to ease the discomfort, maybe try a birthing ball
- Take a warm bath to relax. When you get a contraction pour water over your abdomen to distract and comfort you

Other suggestions are:

- Watch T.V. or a DVD
- Listen to music
- Play a game on your iPad
- Bake a cake!
- Read a book, magazine or newspaper
- Try using a Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS machine) but take it off if you go in the bath
- Take a mild analgesic such as paracetamol
- Dim the lights and rest when you can. When your contractions space out for a period, lie on your left side and close your eyes to reserve energy
- Have a cuddle or make love. This will aid relaxation and may encourage your body to produce a hormone called oxytocin which is important for a shorter and easier labour.

More information?

NHS Choices is a free online information service for parents packed with information and resources about pregnancy and babies
www.nhs.uk

Notes:

If English is not your first language and you need help, please contact the Interpretation and Translation Service

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Date of publication: October 2013

Date of review: October 2019

Date of next review: October 2021

Ref: PI_WC_822

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