

WHAT HAPPENS IN LABOUR & BIRTH



An overview of LABOUR & BIRTH

Birth happens in 3 stages:

Stage 1: labour (within which there are 3-4 phases)

Stage 2: the birth of your baby

Stage 3: the birth of the placenta.



Stage 1: Prelabour

This is the part just before early labour when you may feel nothing or slight cramping. Dilation might be 0-3cm and this may last anywhere from a few days to a few weeks. As this part of the first stage is also the longest (especially if you're a first time mum), I would like to suggest that you:

- Stay distracted - simply focusing on the cramps you get may bring on impatience and even the doubt that you are physiologically able to birth your baby
- Carry on with your daily activities
- Exercise a little but relax and REST!!! - before the more intense contractions come along so you can conserve as much of your energy as possible
- Eat to hunger
- Drink to thirst

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What's happening

- Body is getting ready: the uterine muscles are learning how to contract and doing warm-ups
- Cervix moves from facing your spine to facing the tummy
- Cervix needs to ripen and soften - from as hard as our nose to as soft as your lips
- Cervix needs to thin or efface - from about 3cm to a flattened pancake!

Doula tip:

Have a distraction plan for Early Labour or have a schedule. This way you'll always have something to do while you give your body time to do what it needs to do.

What to expect or what you may experience

- Back aches
- Increase in bowel movements or even soft stools
- Increased amount of pressure on the cervix/vagina/bladder
- Feel like nesting
- Restlessness
- Discouragement, confusion and anxiety - why isn't my baby coming

Tips for partners:

- Provide lots of encouragement & words of affirmation
- Maintain/Increase sense of security for the birthing mama
- Create a soothing, safe, secure, private and loving environment - try ushering her into a warm bath or a relaxing shower
- Play calm, relaxing music while diffusing scents which she likes like lavender or lemongrass



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Stage 1: Early Labour

This phase is a continuation of prelabour but contractions may feel more intense. You may also have more regular and more intense contractions. When this happens, some suggestions I'd like to offer are:

- Stay at home - unless your doctor has advised you to go to the hospital or there are other medical indications
- Eat to hunger
- Stay hydrated - and remember to pee
- Try to carry on with your distraction plan if you have one or with your daily activities
- Sleep and rest if possible; if not, walk, climb stairs, sway and remember to BREATHE!
- If the contractions are intense, try to rest in between

What's happening

- The cervix is continuing to ripen, soften and efface.

What to expect or what you may experience

- More regular contractions
- Back aches
- Bloody show/Birth show
- Loss of mucous plug
- Waters might leak or break*
- Increased pressure of cervix/vagina/bladder
- Increased/Soft bowel movements

*When your waters leak/break, remember to note TACO: the Time it happened, the Amount (was it a leak or a gush), the Colour and the Odour

Doula tip:

Download a contraction timer on your phone and only time contractions for an hour or so - keeping time for too long may lead to increased feelings of impatience and anxiety.

Tips for partners:

- Help time contractions
- Breathe with her
- Maintain calming and relaxing atmosphere
- Be reassuring, supportive and affirming
- Suggest comfort measures discussed with your partner and help her focus on labour
- Remember to take care of yourself - stay hydrated and snack to keep energy levels up!



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Stage 1: Active Labour

In this phase, labour intensifies and contractions are more frequent. Most mothers who are in Active Labour need to stop whatever they're doing and breathe through the contractions. As this phase may last anywhere from 6 to 16 hours, it's important to keep energy levels up and fully relax/rest in between the contractions. This is a marathon, not a race and being in as comfortable position as possible does help many mothers ride through the contractions.

What's happening

- The cervix is dilating from about 2-3cm to 7-8cm.
- The cervix, in some cases, may still be slightly thick.

What to expect or what you may experience

- Start making your way to the hospital
- More regular contractions
- Back aches
- More bloody show/birth show
- Waters might leak or break if they have not
- Increased pressure of cervix/vagina/bladder
- Increased/Soft bowel movements
- Increased levels of endorphins may cause time distortion or even transport mama to an 'alternate' state

Doula tip:

When going from home to hospital, it might help to keep mama calm and focused on labour by having her:

- *wear an eye mask*
- *have the same scent at home being diffused in the car*
- *play calming music*

Tips for partners:

- Stay focused on mama
- Provide assurance and assistance
- Breathe with her and help keep her comfortable
- Suggest positions if she seems like she doesn't know what to do
- Remind her to keep hydrated and offer her snacks to keep her energy levels up
- Validate how she feels and talk her through each contraction. Using affirmations will help.



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Stage 1: Transition

In this phase, contractions are the longest (60-90 seconds), most intense and most frequent (every 2-3 minutes). Most mothers feel like they cannot handle labour for much longer and may feel discouraged. This is where the most encouragement is needed to let mama know that baby is almost ready to meet her!

What's happening

- The cervix is at its last stage of dilation - fully thinned and 10cm dilated.

What to expect or what you may experience

- Mama may feel afraid, anxious, worried, like she cannot do it, shout or even cry
- Mama may experience a change in temperature and feel nauseated
- More bloody show and an increased pressure down below - may feel the urge to do a big poo
- Waters might leak or break if they haven't
- May have soft bowel movements/flatulence

Doula tip:

Spraying some fresh water mist on mama in between contractions may help provide some relief.
Going into the shower may also provide some comfort.

Tips for partners:

- May have to adopt a 'Take Charge' routine - speak firmly and guide mama. Tell her that baby is almost out and give her lots of encouragement.
- Prepare a cold towel to wipe her perspiration - this may provide her with relief
- Prepare a vomit bowl - she might need it

A thought from me: Think of the situation like a boxing match - Every time Mama has a surge she has a really intense workout and when the round ends, she needs to step out, really rest, relax, think of nothing else, get a quick refreshment or snack and go back into the 'ring' again.



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Stage 2: Completion & Birth

There are a number of things that happen in this stage which lasts anywhere from 30 minutes to 2 hours - mama gets a breather (so that the body can gather as much energy as possible to push baby out), baby descends (if baby is still a little high), baby's head crowns and you then get to meet your little one!

What's happening

- Surges are about 2-4 min apart, lasting for about 45-90 secs.

What to expect or what you may experience

- Surge patterns are more downward in direction
- Increased pressure in the anus - mama feels like having a big poo
- A strong and natural urge to breathe baby down or push may be felt (Natural Expulsive Reflex or NER)
- Burning sensation during crowning - mama may feel like there's a large watermelon between her legs that she needs to have out
- Waters may leak or break if they haven't already done so

Doula tip:

When there's a lull or even between pushes, mama should FULLY RELAX and REST so that she has the energy to bring baby into the world.

Tips for partners:

- Give her sips of water in between contractions. (She may ask for something sweet for an energy boost so juice or coconut water would be great!)
- Guide her through the surges - especially on breathing and pushing!
- Provide lots of encouragement and affirmation.
- Remind her to breathe and to relax - especially in the pelvic area and perineum.
- Stay close.

A thought from me: Pushing may get tricky - especially for first time mamas. A good visual would be to imagine that mama needs to do an abdominal crunch or imagine that her breathe is going down towards baby to be birthed in a downward 'J' fashion. The important thing is to breathe between surges so that she gets to rest and doesn't get exhausted so that she can bear down with more strength.



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Stage 3: Birth of Placenta

After your baby is birthed and placed on your chest for immediate skin to skin, the placenta needs to be 'born' too! Milder contractions need to take place for this to happen but they are not as intense as those in the 1st or 2nd stages.

What's happening

- The placenta is birthed while you hold your baby.

What to expect or what you may experience

- Doctor may massage mama's belly to encourage the placenta to be birthed
- Partner will be asked to cut the umbilical cord
- Doctor may stitch any tears that mama may have sustained from baby's birth
- Doctor may also administer medication to encourage the uterus to contract and prevent excessive bleeding

Doula tip:

Waiting to cut the cord or delayed cord clamping (waiting for about 2.5-3 min) will help baby receive the blood from the placenta which belongs to baby. At birth, the placenta still holds 30% of baby's blood!

Tips for partners:

- Encourage mama to continue breathing.
- Focus on mama and your new baby.
- Help mama to position baby comfortably on her chest.
- Protect the first hour of skin to skin or what is referred to as "The Golden Hour".



“Labour and birth is wild. You can see how this is such a vastly different experience for everyone based on pain thresholds, emotional capacity, the people you have around you and of course how the body decides to get you from A to B! I did a natural birth thanks to my wonderful husband and doula and personally it's the best decision I ever made. Don't listen to the horror stories - focus on the positives and just do the checks and balances before the delivery so you are as prepared as possible.”

Alexandra, first time mum

Need more support?

We're here when you're ready.

You're doing something extraordinary—preparing to bring your baby into the world. And even with this guide in hand, the journey can still feel overwhelming.

After supporting countless local and expatriate families through pregnancy, labour and birth, I know this feeling well.

Information is everywhere... yet clarity is hard to find.

Books can't answer your specific questions.

The internet contradicts itself.

And friends and family—however well-meaning—often share advice that doesn't reflect your birth, your values, or your hopes.

If you've ever thought,

“I just need someone who gets it... someone who can help me make sense of all this,”

you're not alone.

I see you. I hear you. And your birth goals truly matter.

What I offer is simple: Unbiased guidance. Evidence-based information.

A calm presence who works for you, supports your choices, and walks alongside you as you craft the birth story that feels right and true to you.

If you feel ready for support that's personalised, compassionate and centred on your unique journey, we'd be honoured to walk that path with you.

Let's prepare for your birth, YOUR way - with confidence and clarity.



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