

Early Labor  
When to Go to the Hospital





## How to Recognize Early Labor

Recognizing the different signs of labor can be helpful in determining when to go to the hospital. While no two pregnancies or labor experiences are the same, there are two distinct phases of labor: early and active. For the majority of first-time mothers, early labor is the longest part of labor and can last up to 20 hours as the body prepares for delivery. During this phase, the cervix will begin dilating and thinning to provide an opening from the uterus to the birth canal. Active labor begins when the cervix dilates to approximately 6 centimeters.

## When to Go to the Hospital

Staying at home during early labor gives you the opportunity to rest and keep yourself well-hydrated. It also increases your chances of a vaginal delivery. Your doctor will recommend when you should go to the hospital based on your individual health history.

Use the following information to help determine when to go in and what to report to your doctor.

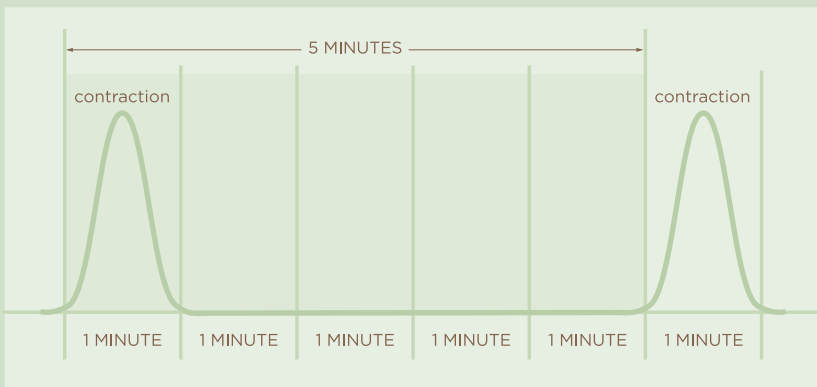
### Contractions Intensify

Contractions often begin as mild and somewhat irregular, but will grow stronger, closer together and in a more regular pattern as your body prepares for active labor.

Measure your contractions periodically by noting:

- *Length*: Time from the start of one contraction to the end of the same contraction
- *Frequency*: Time from the start of one contraction to the start of another

When you have regular, painful contractions that last about 60 seconds each and occur at least every five minutes for more than two hours, it may be time to go to the hospital. However, please follow your doctor's recommendations.



*Contractions coming every five minutes and lasting about 60 seconds can signal the transition from early to active labor.*



### **Water Breaks**

To reduce the risk of infection, go to the hospital if your water breaks, whether or not you have contractions. Note the color, odor and amount of fluid, and the time your water broke.

### **Vaginal Bleeding**

Vaginal bleeding that is more than spotting requires evaluation. If the bleeding is heavy, please go directly to the hospital. Otherwise, call your doctor's office if you experience bleeding in the following situations:

- *Mucus plug* — It is common to have pink or blood-tinged vaginal discharge when you lose your mucus plug. This can happen days before labor. You do not need to be seen for the loss of your mucus plug.
- *Cervical exams* — A small amount of vaginal bleeding is normal for one to two days following a vaginal exam. If the vaginal bleeding is heavy or lasts longer than this, please call your doctor.
- *Intercourse* — Spotting after intercourse is normal. If the spotting is heavy or comes with painful contractions, you should call your doctor's office.

### **Decreased Fetal Movement**

If you notice a significant decrease in your baby's movements or if you are unable to meet the fetal kick count guidelines given to you by your doctor, it may indicate your baby needs further evaluation.

**Call your doctor or come to the Labor and Delivery Triage area at Sharp Grossmont Hospital for Women & Newborns immediately.**



## Tips for Early Labor

If you are in early labor, try to relax. Use the following techniques to increase your comfort while at home.

- Conserve your energy, taking naps if possible
- Eat lightly and drink plenty of fluids
- Use relaxation and breathing techniques
- Take a warm shower or bath
- Listen to music
- Go for a walk or change positions
- Try to empty your bladder at least once every hour
- Have your support person or partner provide a gentle massage or give positive affirmations

## Types of Contractions

As you get closer to your due date, it can be hard to tell when labor officially starts because Braxton-Hicks (false labor) contractions can feel like early labor. Compare the signs on the following page to know when true labor starts.

## True Labor vs. False Labor

TRUE LABOR CONTRACTIONS	FALSE LABOR CONTRACTIONS
Contractions occur at regular intervals	Contractions occur at irregular intervals
Strength of contractions increases	Strength of contractions is relatively unchanged
Time between contractions shortens	Time between contractions does not shorten
Pain occurs in back and/or lower abdomen	Pain occurs primarily in lower abdomen
Pain increases and does not ease with walking	Pain can be relieved with walking
Cervix dilates	Cervix does not dilate

## Evaluation at the Hospital

When you arrive at Sharp Grossmont Hospital for Women & Newborns, we will evaluate you, your baby and your labor progression. If you are less than 4 centimeters dilated and your labor isn't active enough for hospital admission, you might be sent home. Don't be discouraged. It is very common to mistake the signs of early labor for active labor. Be sure to continue timing your contractions and monitoring your fetal kick counts, and keep all of your scheduled prenatal appointments.

Your doctor might suggest a walk in the neighborhood, a nearby park or a mall to help pass the time and ease some discomfort until your labor advances.

**If you're unsure of whether or not you should go to the hospital, contact your doctor.**

**Sharp Grossmont Hospital for Women & Newborns**

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