



**Te Whatu Ora**  
Health New Zealand

# Looking after your early labour (latent phase)

## About the latent phase (early labour)

The early stage of labour is called the latent phase. This is the phase where your body prepares for birth. It is important to let it happen at its own pace.

Labour often takes time before it becomes established and the latent phase can be the longest part of your labour. This phase lasts on average 12-24 hours, but it can stop and start over several days or weeks.

Every labour is different. Looking after this phase of labour will set you up well for the journey ahead.

Before labour your cervix (neck of your womb) is firm, 2-3cms long and closed (if you have had a baby before it may be open slightly).

During the latent phase your cervix softens, shortens, thins out (becomes effaced) and begins to open.

Once your cervix is effaced and has opened to 5cms, this is the start of the active phase of labour for most women. Once you are in the active phase your labour will progress more quickly.

## What to expect in the latent phase

It is common to have irregular tightening to begin with. These may stop completely or develop into backache and 'period like' pain and go on to become regular and strong. Tightening may vary in frequency, strength and length, and they may come in 'bouts'. This is normal as your body may prepare for birth in stages.

If the pains stop, don't be concerned. Your body has done some of its preparation and will start again when it is ready. Be patient and stay calm and relaxed. As your body gets closer to established labour, contractions will become stronger, longer, and more frequent.

You may experience some clear or blood stained sticky discharge called a 'show'. This can happen days or weeks before labour starts and is nothing to worry about.

You may feel increased pelvic pressure/heaviness as your baby moves further into your pelvis.

Your waters may break (membranes rupturing) which can either be a slow leak or a gush of water. The water is usually clear or slightly pink.

## Looking after the latent phase

There are some things that we know are helpful in this phase of labour and will help to support you to have a normal birth:

1. Stay at home until contractions are strong and regular (talk to your LMC about signs of established labour and when to call)
2. Pace yourself - it is normal for this phase to take time
3. Help your baby into a good position
4. Remain calm and well supported
5. Nurture your body with rest, water, and good nutrition

## Home is the best place for you to be in early labour

You are less likely to have intervention in your labour and birth if you stay at home until your labour is established.

Labour is both a physical and a psychological process. Most women find that being at home in a familiar and comfortable environment helps them to feel more relaxed. This is the safest place for you to be.

## Pace yourself

It is normal for the latent phase to take time so pace yourself. Sleep, or rest, as much as possible in the early stages to prepare yourself for the journey ahead. When you can no longer rest distracting yourself can help. Try going for short walks, keep busy at home, watch a movie (comedy helps to increase your endorphin levels), listen to music.

## Help your baby into a good position

The position of your baby is important during labour. When your baby is in an anterior position (with its back away from yours) labour usually progresses more easily. Remaining upright and mobile as much as possible during labour is key to supporting normal birth. Here are some additional things that can help your baby into the best position:

1. Forward leaning positions (with your legs apart) and pelvic rocking either on your hands and knees or leaning forwards against a wall, furniture, or a birth partner. Try different positions
2. Gentle belly dancing moves
3. Gently bouncing or rocking on a swiss ball
4. When sitting either lean to your side or lean forward (straddling a chair and leaning forward onto pillows works well)
5. When resting lie on your side

## Stay calm and 'labour on'

When you feel safe and relaxed, levels of oxytocin (the 'love' or 'labour hormone') that stimulates contractions are higher and labour progress more easily. Remaining calm will help your body to labour once it is ready. Stress causes adrenalin release which can slow labour and make the contractions feel more painful. Creating an environment which supports the release of oxytocin (the labour hormone) and endorphins (your own natural pain relievers) is essential during labour.

### Create a calm physical and mental space:

- Keep the lights low and the space private, undisturbed, and calm
- Relaxing aromatherapy oils (those safe for labour)
- Relaxing music
- Some women find creating a 'nest' for themselves works well
- Have support people that you feel comfortable with
- Physical touch, cuddling, kissing (oxytocin is the 'love hormone')
- Talk to your LMC if you have anything that is worrying you
- Communicate your needs. At times you may need quiet, at other times distraction.
- Believe in yourself and trust in your body

### For your comfort you can try:

- A warm pack, or soft-gel pack which you have cooled in the freezer, for backache
- A TENS machine (when you are not in water). Talk to your LMC
- Water (warm bath or shower)
- Paracetamol 1000 mg (2 tablets) 4-6 hourly (maximum of 8 tablets in 24 hours)
- Relaxation techniques and slow steady breathing during contractions
- Hypnotherapy, mindfulness, meditation, acupuncture techniques if you have prepared for these.
- Massage from a supportive birth partner

## Nurture your body

- Sleep and rest when you need to.
- Drink plenty of water (you may find that you are thirstier than usual). Peppermint tea can help if you feel nauseous.
- Eat small, light meals containing carbohydrates such as bread, pasta, rice, cereals, fruit. Some women find having occasional lollies or mints can help.

## Contact your Lead Maternity Carer (LMC) if you:

- Are less than 37 weeks gestation
- Have any concerns about yourself or your baby
- Have fresh red bleeding
- Have constant abdominal pain
- Are concerned about your baby's movements
- Your waters break and the fluid is green
- You feel unwell
- You think that your labour has established
- You would like to be assessed at home by your LMC

When labour establishes contractions are strong, there are usually 3 in every 10 minutes, and they often last at least 40 seconds. However, every women and every labour are different.

Talk to your LMC during your pregnancy about how you might recognise when your labour is established. Make a plan together for when to notify them during labour and what strategies may work best for you.





**Te Whatu Ora**  
Health New Zealand  
Te Toka Tumai Auckland

Classification number: WH012 (Reviewed: April 2020)  
Women's Health information Unit [hiws@adhb.govt.nz](mailto:hiws@adhb.govt.nz)

