Signs and Symptoms of Preterm Labor

What is preterm labor?
Preterm labor is labor that occurs before 37 completed weeks of pregnancy. Sometimes preterm labor starts due to a problem that can be treated and the preterm labor can be stopped, but other times it cannot or should not be stopped. Therefore, any time a woman thinks she might be in preterm labor, she needs to contact a health care provider.

Why should people learn about preterm labor?
No one can predict who will have preterm labor; it can happen to any pregnant woman, and preterm labor can lead to preterm birth.

How does preterm birth affect the baby?
Babies born more than three weeks before their due dates can have serious problems such as breathing, eating, keeping blood sugars normal, staying warm and developing jaundice. Some preterm babies will also have life-threatening or life-long health disabilities such as cerebral palsy, blindness and chronic lung problems, or milder problems such as behavior and learning problems, clumsiness or ADHD. The effects of preterm birth can also increase the likelihood of developing diseases in adulthood. One example of this is diabetes, with preterm babies having 18 times the risk for developing diabetes as an adult, compared to babies born at full term.

Signs and symptoms of preterm labor
Should any of the following signs and symptoms occur before 37 weeks of pregnancy, it could mean the pregnant woman is experiencing preterm labor.

She doesn’t need to experience all of them – even one symptom means she should seek help.
• Uterine contractions every 10 minutes or more often.
• Menstrual-like cramps in the lower abdomen that come and go or are constant.
• Low dull backache below the waistline that comes and goes or is constant.
• Pelvic pressure that feels like the baby is pushing down. (This may come and go.)
• Abdominal cramping with or without diarrhea.
• Vaginal discharge that suddenly increases or has mucous, water or blood in it.

All women should learn to recognize the signs of preterm labor. If they happen, get help quickly.

How to check for contractions
The pregnant woman should lie down and place her hands against her abdomen. If her uterus tightens (contracts) and then softens (relaxes), she is having a contraction. Some may be harder or stronger than others, but she should be aware that preterm labor contractions are often painless.

What is the difference between preterm labor contractions and Braxton Hicks contractions?
While it can sometimes be normal for the uterus to contract off and on during pregnancy (Braxton Hicks), these are more likely to occur when a pregnant woman first lies down, after sex, or after she walks up and down stairs. However, it is not normal to have regular, frequent contractions before the pregnancy reaches full term. If she experiences six or more contractions in one hour,
then her uterus is contracting too often and this puts the pregnancy at risk for preterm labor. She should call her health care provider right away.

**What other symptoms should be reported to the health care provider?**

A pregnant woman should call right away if she has:

- Water or blood coming from her vagina.
- Any of the signs and symptoms of preterm labor.

Waiting too long to call for help could result in the baby being born too early.

Depending on the woman’s symptoms, the health care provider may tell her to come to the hospital immediately or may recommend other ways to further evaluate the situation.

**What can pregnant women do?**

Learn what to do to help a pregnancy go to full term.

- She should tell her doctor if she has had a previous baby that was born before 37 weeks – that is the strongest predictor that the next baby might be preterm, and the doctor will want to watch her and the baby more closely.
- Learn the warning signs of preterm labor and react quickly if they happen; get the help needed to try to prevent the baby from being born too early.

If the doctor advises her to deliver before 39 weeks, she should understand the medical reasons why and be aware that there are risks involved with having a scheduled induction of labor and/or a scheduled Cesarean section without medical reasons. She should discuss with her provider how to maximize the chances for a healthy, full-term baby. (See also the fact sheet titled “Good Health may Help Prevent Preterm Birth.”)

*Healthy Babies Are Worth the Wait*® is a multifaceted partnership of the March of Dimes, the Johnson & Johnson Pediatric Institute and the Kentucky Department for Public Health. The primary goal of the initiative is a 15 percent reduction in the rate of “preventable” single preterm births – particularly babies born late preterm (four to six weeks early) – in three targeted intervention sites in Kentucky: King’s Daughters Medical Center in Ashland, Trover Health System Regional Medical Center of Hopkins County and the University of Kentucky Albert B. Chandler Hospital in Lexington. Health care teams at each site provide mothers-to-be with an integrated approach of education, counseling and clinical care.

For more information, call **1-800-333-8874** or visit our Web site at [ukhealthcare.uky.edu/obgyn](http://ukhealthcare.uky.edu/obgyn) or the following sites:

- [www.prematurityprevention.org](http://www.prematurityprevention.org)
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