

LABOR

How will I know when I am in labor?

Unfortunately, no one can tell you the exact time you will go into labor. However, there are a few things you *may* experience as labor approaches.

- **Lightening:** This is when the baby “drops” down into the birth canal. With a first pregnancy this can happen 2-3 weeks before labor begins. You may suddenly find it easier to breath but now feel the need to urinate more frequently. If this is not your first baby, “lightening” usually occurs immediately before or even during labor.
- **Discharge:** This is more commonly referred to as “show”, or your mucous plug. During pregnancy, a thick mucous plug covers the cervix to serve as a barrier against infection. When the cervix begins to thin and open, this discharge is expelled through the vagina. It may come out in one piece or in small amounts. The mucous can be green (snot-like) or blood tinged (bloody show). This “show” may occur a few days or even a few weeks before labor begins. Many women do not even notice losing their mucous plug.
- **Rupture of Membranes:** This is when the amniotic sac that surrounds the baby (“bag of waters”) breaks. This may happen a few hours before the onset of contractions, or at any time during labor. The fluid should be clear, but it may be green or blood tinged. If your “bag of waters” breaks, with or without contractions, you should go to the hospital.
- **Contractions:** Throughout the second half of your pregnancy you may have noticed your abdomen getting hard, then soft again, or you may feel like the baby is “balling up”. These irregular contractions may increase in frequency and intensity as your due date approaches. They may become very uncomfortable or even painful. These irregular contractions “false labor pains” are called Braxton Hicks contractions.

Could this be false labor?

Sometimes it is difficult to tell the difference between false labor and true labor without having your cervix checked by a doctor or nurse. A good way for you to tell the difference is to time the contractions.

To time a contraction, put your hand on your abdomen. When your uterus begins to feel hard (pain/discomfort starts), that is when the contraction begins. When the uterus softens (pain/discomfort ends), that is when the contraction ends. To time the frequency of your contractions, start from the beginning of the first contraction to the start of the next contraction. This is how far apart your contractions are. You should time the frequency and duration of your contractions for at least an hour.

During **true** labor:

- Contractions usually last about 30-70 seconds
- The contractions occur at regular intervals, getting longer, stronger, and closer together
- The contractions do not go away if you change position
- The contractions are felt in the lower abdomen or back and come around to the front

During **false** labor:

- The contractions are irregular and do not usually get closer together
- The contractions may stop when you change position or rest
- The contractions are often felt only in the abdomen

Go to the hospital when:

- Your water breaks, even without contractions
- You are having vaginal bleeding
- You have constant severe pain
- If you are more than 36 weeks pregnant and your contractions are consistently 5-7 minutes apart, or if you are less than 36 weeks pregnant and having more than 6 contractions/hour