

PRETERM LABOR

Normal term pregnancies deliver between 37 and 41 weeks of gestation. Babies who deliver before 37 weeks are premature and have a higher risk of having difficulty breathing, eating and keeping warm.

Preterm labor is labor that begins after 20 weeks of pregnancy and before 37 weeks. Uterine contractions cause the cervix to open and/or thin out (efface) earlier than normal and can result in the birth of a premature baby. Women carrying twins or who have a history of preterm labor in a previous pregnancy are at a higher risk of premature birth. In most cases, the cause of preterm labor and birth is not known. Early identification of the signs of preterm labor may help to prevent an early delivery.

Warning signs and symptoms:

- * Uterine contractions that occur more than six times an hour
- * Menstrual cramps
- * Pelvic pressure unrelieved with lying down
- * Increase or change in vaginal discharge, especially if mucousy, watery or mixed with blood

Self-detection of uterine contractions:

It is normal to have some contractions throughout the day. They most commonly occur when a woman is physically active or when she changes positions such as changing from sitting to lying down. Most normal contractions will disappear with rest and drinking a large glass of juice or water.

You can identify a contraction by placing your hands gently on your abdomen over the uterus. When a contraction occurs you will feel your abdomen get hard or tight for about 30-60 seconds and then soft again. If this occurs repetitively over the course of an hour, you may be developing preterm labor.

What should you do?

- * Drink a large glass of juice or water and lie down tilted towards one side. Many times rest and fluids will cause the contractions to stop.
- * Check for contractions for about one hour. Time the interval from the beginning of one contraction to the beginning of the next.
- * Call your provider if the contractions do not resolve after one hour or if you have any other associated symptoms.