

The Latent Phase of Labour



Defining the beginning of labour can be very difficult. Every labour is different and it can sometimes take a long time. This is normal. If you think you are in the first stage of labour, the main thing to remember is to stay calm and relaxed.

Contractions

Some women feel contractions in the uterus many weeks before delivery. These contractions are usually not labour contractions, but contraction in the muscle of the uterus which doesn't have an effect on the cervix. These contractions are called Braxton Hicks. They are painless and last about 30-60 seconds.

When labour begins, they are usually longer, stronger, more regular and often more painful than Braxton Hicks.

The three stages of labour

Labour is divided into three stages. 1, 2 and 3.

- 1st stage: The neck of the womb (cervix) shortens and gradually opens to 10cm.
- 2nd stage: When the baby moves down through the vagina and is born.
- 3rd stage: When the afterbirth (placenta) is delivered.

The Latent phase

The so called latent phase is the beginning of the first part of labour. It is a period of time that will not necessarily be continuous and is unique to each individual woman. Some women will have backache and cramps or have bouts of contractions that may last a few hours which then stop and start up again the next day. This is perfectly normal. The duration of the latent phase of labour can be variable. It may last for 24 hours or more and can be exhausting for you. It helps if you can stay as relaxed as possible during this part of your labour and remain at home in comfortable surroundings as long as you can. This is an exciting time even if it is tiring.

The contractions may feel uncomfortable even though they may not be regular. Often they are short but sharp and last for 40-60 seconds. This may continue for several hours. This is all normal. The neck of the womb (the cervix) has been long and closed during your pregnancy. These first contractions, along with the Braxton-Hicks contractions that you may have already experienced, help to soften the neck of the womb and prepare your body for active labour.

When has labour begun?

When the contractions are regular at 3-5 minutes intervals, last about 1 minute and the cervix is open more than 4cm, labour usually considered to be in the active phase. If you think that labour has begun, you should contact your Maternity Unit or your midwife.



How can I help myself during the latent phase?

There are many ways of helping yourself to cope through these first hours of the latent phase of labour.

- It is important to try and remain relaxed.
- Keep your breathing deep, steady and slow during a contraction. This will prevent you from using extra energy. Once the contraction is wearing off, close your eyes and allow your body to rest before the next one.
- Take a warm bath or shower at regular intervals. You will find the warmth of the water soothing and relaxing.
- Ensure you maintain your energy levels by eating small, light meals containing carbohydrates.
- Remaining upright will assist gravity and help your baby to descend into the pelvis. Rocking your pelvis and swaying your hips can also assist you.
- If you have access to a birthing ball, use it regularly as this too can alleviate any discomfort.
- You may want to have your birthing partner with you for added support during this time. They will give you support and reassurance to help reduce your anxiety.
- It will be helpful if your partner massages your back to help with any backache and help you to relax and support you in any alternative positions that you may adopt.
- If you have a TENS machine it is good to use it during this time, for example on the back and hips.
- It is important to remain active without exhausting yourself during this time. Take a walk with your partner, stopping if you need to during a contraction. At night time try to rest and sleep if you can.
- Make sure you drink well. The use of isotonic (energy) drinks will also add to your energy requirements and keep you hydrated.
- It is safe to take simple pain killers if necessary, such as Paracetamol. It is best to talk to your midwife about this. You can take two (500mg) tablets, every four to six hours. Do not take more than eight tablets within a 24 hour period.

If you have tried the above suggestions and feel that you can no longer cope with being at home, please contact the Maternity Unit and speak to a midwife. She will probably invite you to come to the hospital to examine you, and then discuss whether you should return home again if labour is not well established. This is quite common and perfectly normal.



References: Obstetrics and Gynaecology. The Latent Phase of Labour, published 2012 by University Hospital, Coventry and Warwickshire (www.uhcw.nhs.uk)