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- ◆ Spot the early signs of labour
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Recognising the Early Signs of Labour

Are you having contractions? Did your water break? Get acquainted with the early signs of labour. ■ WORDS ANNA FERNANDEZ

Early labour may be a good time to try out different positions and breathing techniques to see if they can help you endure your labour pains. It will also be beneficial if you try to remain calm and relaxed, so your body can release the hormone oxytocin, which is needed to bring on contractions in a timely manner, allowing labour to progress.

You can usually stay at home during the early stages of this phase, which can take hours or even days. Although every pregnant woman's experience of labour is different, here are some changes that occur during pre-labour and early labour that can be deemed as tell-tale signs that labour is imminent.

Pelvic Pressure

If this is your first pregnancy, you may experience what is known as "lightening" a few weeks before labour begins. Your baby will start to descend into your pelvis. For future births, this "lightening" doesn't usually happen until you're truly in labour. You'll have even more difficulty walking around than you have been and you may be taking very frequent bathroom breaks just like you did during your first trimester because the baby's head is pushing down on your bladder.

Physical Changes

Joints become looser

Before you go into labour, you may notice your joints feeling a bit looser. The hormone relaxin is responsible for this. It relaxes the ligaments in the pelvis and stretches your muscles.

Relaxin also promotes the rupture of the membranes surrounding the foetus, and causes the opening and softening of the cervix and vagina in preparation for childbirth.

Dr Ng Kai Lyn, associate consultant at National University Hospital's Women's Centre says, "In the weeks leading up to your delivery, you will experience a softening of the pelvic ligaments to allow for a roomier pelvis. This may manifest as an aching sensation and should not be a cause of alarm as it is part of your body's natural preparation for the arrival of your baby."

Nipples leak

It's not just during breastfeeding that nipples can leak – it can occur throughout your final trimester. It will probably be most noticeable during

the last few weeks before your baby arrives. The milk you're leaking is colostrum, a nutrient-rich liquid that will protect newborns from bacteria and viruses until your body produces proper milk a couple of days after delivery.

Cervix starts to expand

The first stage of labour is when contractions result in an expansion of the cervix, which is the neck of your womb (uterus). In the days and weeks before delivery, changes in the connective tissue of your cervix result in it softening and eventually thinning and widening, or dilating.

The first changes in dilation are gradual. Pregnant women can dilate up to three centimetres and remain at that dilation for several weeks with no further indication of labour. However, when active labour begins, dilation typically speeds up.

By the end of this stage, your cervix will be fully dilated, and open to about 10 centimetres in diameter.

More Frequent Contractions

You will experience more frequent and intense Braxton Hicks contractions,

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which can signal pre-labour. Some women experience persistent lower back pain and menstrual-like cramps during this time.

Braxton Hicks and labour contractions can be easily differentiated. Dr Christopher Ng, medical director at GynaeMD Women's & Rejuvenation Clinic at Camden Medical Centre explains, "Braxton Hicks contractions can occur at any time causing discomfort in your lower abdomen and groin. They usually resolve after resting. In true labour, the contractions increase in frequency and intensity as time passes."

Unlike Braxton-Hicks contractions, labour contractions become increasingly longer, more intense, and more frequent as they cause your cervix to dilate. You'll feel their pinch as the muscles in your uterus tighten in preparation for delivery.

Loss of Your Mucus Plug

In the last days before labour, you'll see increased or thickened vaginal discharge. You may also notice the loss of your mucus plug, which has sealed off your cervical canal throughout your pregnancy. This thick, pinkish discharge can come out in one lump or gradually over a few days. Also called a bloody show, it is a good indication that labour is imminent, especially when accompanied by contractions and

dilation of three to four centimetres. According to Dr Ng Kai Lyn, however, some women may not even notice its passage and labour can begin soon after the mucus plug is discharged or up to one to two weeks later.

If you're more than 37 weeks pregnant, losing your mucus plug shouldn't be any cause for alarm unless it is accompanied by heavy bleeding.

Dr Christopher Ng cautions, "If the amniotic fluid discharged from the vagina is heavily stained with blood or greenish in colour, this could indicate signs of early placental abruption or uterine rupture (in cases of a previous caesarean section) or foetal distress respectively and one should immediately rush to the hospital."

Your Water Breaks

While movies would depict that you'll learn you're in labour only when your water breaks, that's quite an unlikely scenario. It's actually one of the last signs of labour women experience and happens in fewer than 15 per cent of births.

Otherwise known as the spontaneous rupture of the membranes or the rupturing of the sac of amniotic fluid surrounding your baby, it can occur as a gush or a trickle, depending on how much amniotic fluid you have and whether it is the fore-waters (the large volume of fluids in front of the baby's head), or the hind-waters (the smaller amount of fluid behind the baby's head).

Normal amniotic fluid is straw-coloured and you may be able to distinguish it from urine because it is sweeter smelling.

Especially if this is your first pregnancy, it can be easy to focus on the overwhelming pain that comes with childbirth. But know that with every passing moment, you'll be one step closer to meeting your little bundle of joy! 🍷

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