

*An important message for pregnant women,  
their partners and families*

# Preterm Labour Signs & Symptoms



*Learn about the signs of preterm labour  
and what to do if it happens.*

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by/par health **nexus** santé

# What is preterm labour?

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A normal, or **term** pregnancy lasts 37 to 42 weeks.

**Labour** is a process which happens at the end of the pregnancy. In labour, there are contractions (tightenings) of the uterus (womb) that cause the cervix (opening to the womb) to open.

**Preterm (premature) labour** is labour that starts before 37 completed weeks of pregnancy.

# What does this mean for my baby?

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Preterm labour may lead to a preterm birth, that is your baby being born too soon.

Preterm babies:

- may have trouble breathing, feeding, and keeping warm
- may be more likely to get infections
- may need special care in the hospital
- may have to stay in the hospital after their mother goes home

Although babies born between 34-37 weeks are close to term, they still may have difficulties related to feeding, breathing, etc.

The earlier your baby is born preterm, the more likely he or she is to have long term health problems such as:

- blindness
- difficulty walking
- problems learning
- asthma and respiratory infections

Some preterm babies are very small and may not be strong enough to live.



*Share the information in this pamphlet with your partner and family.*

# Could this happen to me?

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*Yes, preterm labour can happen to anyone.*

Even if you are healthy and do “all the right things”, there is still a chance that preterm labour can happen to you. Medical experts do not know all the reasons why labour starts too early.

*Some women may be more likely than others to have a preterm birth.*

For example, these may be women who:

- have had a preterm baby before
- are carrying more than one baby, for example twins
- are smokers
- are underweight when they become pregnant
- are not getting enough healthy food
- have a lot of stress in their life
- have a vaginal or bladder infection
- have had several miscarriages
- do strenuous work
- are adolescents
- experience violence
- use illicit drugs



*One in every 13 babies in Canada is born too soon.*

# What can I do to reduce the chances of preterm labour?

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Although it is not possible to prevent all preterm labour from happening, **there is still much you can do to help your baby to be born at the right time:**

- start prenatal care as early as possible in pregnancy and see your doctor or midwife regularly
- go to prenatal classes early in your pregnancy
- if you smoke, try to quit or at least cut down
- take time to lie down or put your feet up during the day
- follow Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide
- listen to your body – notice when things feel “different” and talk to your doctor or midwife about it
- talk to your doctor or midwife about how to deal with the stress in your life
- If you are treated for fertility, talk to your doctor about the risk of having more than one baby.
- If you need help dealing with tobacco, drugs or violence issues, talk to your doctor or midwife.
- learn everything you can about preterm labour:
  - ask your doctor or midwife questions
  - keep this pamphlet handy



*A message for partners: You can help by knowing the signs of preterm labour and what to do if it happens.*

# How do I know if I am having preterm labour?

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It is not always easy for a woman to tell if she is having preterm labour. Many of the signs of preterm labour can feel the same as some of the normal things that happen in the second half of pregnancy. There are important signs to watch for, especially if they are *new* or *different* from before.

## *Signs & symptoms of preterm labour:*

- bad cramps or stomach pains that don't go away
- trickle or gush of fluid, or bleeding, from your vagina
- lower back pain/pressure, or a change in lower backache
- a feeling that the baby is pushing down
- contractions, or change in the strength or number of them
- an increase in the amount of vaginal discharge

Some women may just feel that “*something is not right*”.

## *A word about contractions*

Preterm labour contractions can feel different from the normal tightenings that many women feel in the second half of pregnancy:

- they **may feel more regular**,
- they **do not go away** if you move around or lie down
- **there may be other signs** that happen with the contractions, such as fluid leaking from the vagina or pelvic pressure

A swab may also be done to help your doctor or midwife see if you are at risk of having your baby early.

## *You also need medical care if you have:*

- fever, chills, dizziness, vomiting or a bad headache
- blurry vision or spots before your eyes
- sudden or severe swelling of your feet, hands or face
- a significant change in your baby's movement

# What should I do if I think I am in preterm labour?

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If you have any of the signs of preterm labour,

## GO TO THE HOSPITAL RIGHT AWAY

*You need to be assessed by a doctor or midwife to confirm if you are in preterm labour.*

*You can call your own doctor or midwife once you get to the hospital. If you cannot drive yourself, ask a neighbour or friend to help. If you cannot get to the hospital right away, call the birthing unit at your hospital for advice.*

# What happens if I am in preterm labour?

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When you arrive at the birthing unit in the hospital, the doctor or midwife will check to see if you are in labour. Some tests and monitoring may be needed.

***If there are no changes or only very small changes in the cervix,***

- you will probably get to go home and rest
- your own doctor or midwife will want to see you soon.

***If your cervix has started to open or shorten*** and the doctor or midwife thinks that you might give birth soon, you will be admitted to the hospital for treatment. (You may have to be transferred to a hospital that provides special care for preterm babies.)

***If you are less than 34 weeks pregnant*** you will probably receive two doses of a medication to help your baby's lungs to mature. This medication works best if it is in your body for 48 hours, so you may also receive another medication to delay or stop the labour for at least this amount of time.

***After this second medication,***

- your body may delay labour on its own for a few weeks
- it is also possible that the labour will only be delayed for a short time and that your baby will be born early. Even a little bit of time will help the baby to grow and mature and become more ready for birth.



*It's important to get to the hospital early if you are in preterm labour – it can make a big difference to your baby's health.*

*If you have any questions after reading this pamphlet, write them down here and talk to your doctor or midwife at your next visit:*

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*Questions my partner has for my doctor or midwife:*

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*Bring this booklet with you the next time you visit your doctor or midwife.*

# Remember:

*Preterm labour can happen to anyone.*

*Know the signs of preterm labour.*

*Go to hospital right away if you think  
you have preterm labour.*

**Hospital telephone number:** \_\_\_\_\_

(ask for the “birthing unit”)

**Doctor or midwife’s number:** \_\_\_\_\_

*This information was adapted from a publication produced by the Community Steering Group of the Ottawa-Carleton Preterm Birth Prevention Program*

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