

THE PREGNANCY CARE CENTER

Logo

Understanding Labor Signs

Recognizing the signs of labor and knowing when to call your doctor

Labor is the process of your uterus contracting to open (dilate) your cervix and push your baby through the birth canal. Recognizing true labor signs helps you know when to head to the hospital.

Early signs that labor may be approaching

- **Lightening:** Your baby drops lower into your pelvis, making breathing easier but increasing pressure on your bladder. This can happen hours or weeks before labor 【308610066796658†L164-L174】.
- **Loss of the mucus plug:** You may notice increased discharge, sometimes tinged with blood. This plug sealed your cervix and is released as it begins to dilate 【308610066796658†L176-L189】.
- **Rupture of membranes ("water breaking"):** Fluid may gush or trickle from your vagina when the amniotic sac breaks 【308610066796658†L190-L196】. Call your provider if your water breaks, even if contractions haven't started.

Contractions: true vs. false labor

- **True labor contractions** come at regular intervals, get closer together and stronger over time and do not go away when you change position or rest 【308610066796658†L222-L235】. The pain often starts in your back and moves to the front 【308610066796658†L237-L249】.
- **Braxton Hicks contractions** ("practice contractions") are irregular, often stop with rest or hydration and don't increase in intensity 【308610066796658†L204-L216】.

When to call your provider or go to the hospital

Seek immediate medical attention if you have: * Contractions every 5 minutes for one hour (for first-time parents) or more frequent if you've given birth before. * Water breaking without contractions 【308610066796658†L190-L196】. * Heavy vaginal bleeding or constant severe pain

with no relief between contractions【308610066796658†L251-L264】. * Reduced fetal movements. First-time labor typically lasts 12–18 hours, but every labor is different【308610066796658†L265-L270】. Discuss guidelines with your provider.

Preparing for labor

Pack your hospital bag around 36 weeks, practice your route to the hospital and arrange child care. Discuss when to call your provider, who will be on call after hours and what to expect if labor doesn't start on its own【308610066796658†L273-L306】.

Sources

1. American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG): "How to tell when labor begins"【308610066796658†L156-L306】.