

Prenatal Education

Key Messages for Ontario



Preterm Labour

Key Messages

Preterm labour can lead to preterm birth.

Labour is the natural process where the uterus contracts causing the cervix to thin out and open so your baby can be born. This normally happens between 37 and 42 weeks of your pregnancy. Preterm labour is labour that starts before the 37th week of pregnancy. Your due date is the date that you are estimated to be 40 weeks pregnant based on your last menstrual period and/or ultrasound.

Preterm labour can lead to preterm birth. Preterm birth is when the baby is born between 20 and 37 weeks of pregnancy. Premature babies need to be cared for in special units in the hospital. Babies may have to stay in the hospital for a few weeks to a few months until they are strong enough to go home with their families. Premature babies are at risk for medical problems after they are born. Some premature babies are too small, too immature, or too sick to survive.

Be alert for signs of preterm labour especially if you are at risk.

You may have an increased risk of having preterm labour if:

- ▶ You had preterm labour or a preterm baby in the past.
- ▶ You had several miscarriages.
- ▶ You had a suture placed in your cervix during the pregnancy or have been told you have a short cervix.
- ▶ You have a urinary tract infection or certain sexually-transmitted infections.
- ▶ Your water breaks before the 37th week. This is called premature rupture of the membranes.
- ▶ You are pregnant with more than one baby.
- ▶ You were underweight before getting pregnant or you are not gaining enough weight during the pregnancy.
- ▶ You smoke or take illegal drugs during the pregnancy.
- ▶ You are under the age of 18 or over the age of 35.
- ▶ You have a lot of stress or violence in your life.
- ▶ You do very hard work at your job or home.
- ▶ You work shifts; you stand for long periods of time at your work; you work in temperature extremes (like a bakery).

It is important to get immediate medical attention if you think you may be in preterm labour.

Even if you don't have any risk factors for preterm labour, you should see your health care provider if you have any of the following signs before 37 weeks of pregnancy:

- ▶ You have cramps or contractions in your uterus that are happening more than normal for you or more than four in an hour. Preterm contractions may not be painful in preterm labour.
- ▶ The cramps or contractions do not go away or are not getting better no matter what you do.
- ▶ You have cramps or contractions that are becoming more uncomfortable or painful.
- ▶ You have bleeding or an increase in discharge from your vagina.
- ▶ You think your bag of water has broken, or you feel a gush of fluid from your vagina, or your underwear is more wet than normal.
- ▶ You have a low backache that is getting more uncomfortable, pressure in your bowels like you want to have a bowel movement, or pressure in your pelvic area or vagina.
- ▶ You just don't feel right.

You must go to the hospital or be seen by your health care provider to be assessed. It is always better to go and be assessed than to stay home and worry

If you have questions and are not able to speak with your health care provider, call Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000 to speak to a Registered Nurse. This service is available in English and French with translators available for other languages. It is available 24 hours a day and seven days a week. If you have a midwife, you can page your midwife or her colleagues anytime using the number given to you when you started midwifery care.

If you have a high risk of preterm birth or have signs that you might be in preterm labour, your health care provider will assess you and may offer treatments to reduce the chance of having a preterm birth.

Assessments and treatments for preterm labour may include:

- ▶ Ultrasound to see if the length of the cervix is shortening.
- ▶ Speculum exam to examine the cervix, check for bleeding, and collect cells from your cervix with a swab to assess your risk of going into preterm labour and/or to see if you have an infection.
- ▶ Medications such as:
 - ▶ Steroids to help the baby's lungs develop in case the baby will be born early.
 - ▶ Antibiotics if you have an infection or to prevent infection.
 - ▶ Medications to attempt to slow down labour.
- ▶ Being admitted to the hospital to rest and be monitored more closely.
- ▶ Being transferred to or staying at a level two or level three hospital until your baby is born. Level two and level three hospitals have experience caring for women with preterm labour and special nurseries for preterm babies.

Your health care provider may suggest that you:

- ▶ Decrease your sexual activity and stop having sex and orgasms. Sexual intercourse can sometimes trigger uterine contractions.
- ▶ Stop work, stay at home, decrease your activity, and spend more time resting.

Sometimes medical care does not prevent a premature birth. In this situation, your baby would be cared for in a special-care nursery until your baby is ready to go home.

Learn more about preterm labour.

You can find out more about preterm labour from the following resources.

- ▶ Your health care provider
- ▶ Your local public health unit 1-866-532-3161
- ▶ Your prenatal educator
- ▶ Best Start Resource Centre
 - ▶ Preterm labour Signs & Symptoms
www.beststart.org/resources/rep_health/preterm/Preterm_English_2012.pdf
- ▶ oMama
www.omama.com