WOMEN'S HEALTH
of Central Virginia

How to Recognize the Early Signs Of Labor

A Quick Reference Guide

Women's Health Services of Central Virginia

This information is designed to give you an idea of what signs you can look for to identify true labor and a general set of guidelines to help you prepare for one of the most exciting events of your life.

You've been preparing for this moment for quite a few months. Regular appointments with your obstetrician have helped you monitor the development and growth of your baby. By now, the anticipation is almost overwhelming. You probably want your doctor/midwife to tell you exactly when your baby will arrive.

But we all know that, just as every baby is different, every birth is different, and there is no way to predict the timing of the imminent events with any surety.

We have included some guidelines to let you find your symptoms and see what they might mean. We have also included a section on false labor, so that you can assess the nature of your discomfort with some references.

Your Due Date

Many patients believe due dates are magical times, calculated by their obstetrician with scientific precision. While it is true that your doctor/midwife calculates your due date based on the information presented to him or her, due dates are a little more elusive than that simple calculation can foretell.

Your labor may start as early as two weeks before your due date, or as late as two weeks after your due date, and still be considered normal. *Remember,* due dates are just guidelines to help everyone prepare.

What Do I Need To Do?

You have been meeting with your doctor/midwife throughout your pregnancy. As your due date comes closer, be sure to ask him or her any questions you may have while you

are at their office. That way, when your labor starts, you can head straight to the hospital with the comfort of knowing you have discussed all of your concerns ahead of time with your doctor/midwife.

Be sure to ask if your doctor/midwife has any special procedures that they recommend for their patients who have started labor, including:

- Do I need to call my doctor/midwife before I go to the hospital?
- Where do I go?
- What should I expect?

Planning Ahead

On the last page of this information, we have included a basic map that will help you find your way to Virginia Baptist Hospital. You should make sure you have studied the map. You might want to drive to the maternity entrance of the hospital once or twice to establish a baseline time to arrive at your destination.

The doctors/midwives of Women's Health Services of Central Virginia perform all of their deliveries at *Virginia Baptist Hospital* in Lynchburg. *A new Maternity wing* in the hospital was completed in the spring of 1999. *Tours* are conducted at the hospital on the 1st and 3rd Wednesdays at 1pm and 7pm.

Make sure you know who is going to drive you to the hospital, and how you will reach them on the big day (or night).

Make sure you make arrangements for childcare if you have children at home now.

Remember, everything you take care of now means less to think about later.

Important Phone Numbers

Women's Health Services of Central Virginia
(114 Nationwide Drive)
434-239-7890

Virginia Baptist Hospital Maternity

434-200-4660

What Happens During Labor?

Labor is different for every birth. The basic processes remain the same though. There are three stages of labor.

- Stage one: The opening of the uterus, called the cervix, opens up enough to allow the fetus to move from the uterus into the vagina.
- Stage two: The muscles of the uterus contract to push the fetus through the birth canal. The mother pushes, or bears down, to assist the process. The stage ends when the baby is born.
- Stage three: The thick pad of tissue, called the placenta, which provided nourishment to the fetus throughout the pregnancy, comes out of the uterus through the birth canal.

How To Tell The Difference Between True Labor vs. False Labor

You will notice many changes in your body as your pregnancy progresses. In the last few weeks of pregnancy, you may specifically notice that your abdomen will harden and soften at intervals. As your delivery date gets closer, this process may get uncomfortable, even painful. These cramps are called Braxton-Hicks contractions, or false labor pains. Physical activity may make them occur more frequently.

Rest and drinking more fluids (water, Gatorade) should make the false labor pains better. False labor may occur around your due date. This may make it more difficult for you to decide if it is false labor or true labor. Don't be embarrassed if you react by thinking you are experiencing the real thing. Sometimes the difference can only be told by a vaginal exam.

One way for you to tell if you are in labor is to time the contractions (tightening of abdomen/uterus). If you time how long each cramping period lasts and the length of time between each cramping period for an hour, you can refer to the following guidelines for reference.

During true labor:

- *Contractions last about 30-70 seconds.*
- *Contractions occur at regular intervals.*
- *Contractions don't go away when you move around.*
- If your contractions are slight, it can be difficult to time them. It is best to err on the side of caution. If you have questions, you may call the office or go to labor and delivery.

If you think you are going into labor, put your plan into action. Follow the plan you and your doctor/midwife have constructed over your pregnancy.

Other Reasons To Go Straight To The Hospital

- If your water breaks, you should go to the hospital, even if you are not having contractions.
- If you have heavy bleeding from the vagina (more than a period).
- If you have constant severe pain (anywhere).

Signs You Are Approaching Labor

Sign	*Scientific Name/Explanation*	*Timing*
Baby feels as though it has dropped lower	*Lightening: The baby's head has settled deep into your pelvis.*	*This occurs anytime from a few weeks from labor to a few hours from labor.*
An increase in vaginal discharge (clear, pink, or slightly bloody), or a discharge of a thick plug of mucous	*Show: The thick, mucous plug that accumulates at the cervix during pregnancy is pushed into the vagina when the cervix begins to open*	*Several days before labor or at onset of labor*
Discharging a continuous trickle or a gush of watery fluid from your vagina	*Rupture of membranes: Commonly called having your water break, this signifies that the fluid filled sac that has surrounded the baby during pregnancy has broken*	*Several hours before labor or anytime during labor*
Cramping that occurs in a regular pattern. May feel like a bad backache or menstrual cramps	*Contractions: Contractions may cause pain as the cervix opens and the baby moves through the birth canal*	*Usually at onset of labor*