



# Maternity Information Leaflet

## Early Labour - The Latent Phase

## **Latent phase definition**

The National Institute of Clinical Excellence (2007) recommend the following definitions of stages of labour:

Latent phase:

A period of time, not necessarily continuous, when there are painful contractions and there is some cervical change, including cervical effacement and dilatation up to 4cm

## **Contractions**

In the latent phase of labour, contractions may start and stop. This is normal. Contractions may continue for several hours but not become longer and stronger. They stay at about 30 – 40 seconds. This is normal too, in the latent phase.

Many women have a vaginal examination during the latent phase which finds, for example, the cervix is 1- 2 centimetres dilated. Their contractions may then stop for a few hours. This is a good time to rest and make sure you have something to eat. When your body has built up some energy supplies, your contractions will start again. If you are in hospital when you have this examination, the

Midwife may advise you to go home and wait for the contractions to get longer, stronger and closer together. Most women are more relaxed at home in the latent part.

It is not possible to say when active labour will begin. It could start in a couple of hours or in several days, so try to stay as relaxed as you can and distract yourself from focussing only on the contractions.

Remember – a 'start-stop' pattern of contractions is normal. Before labour starts, the neck of the womb is long and

firm. During the latent phase, the muscles of the uterus (womb) contract and make the cervix become flat and soft, at the same time as opening it to 3-4cm. This flattening is called 'cervical effacement' or thinning.

The latent phase can last several days or weeks before active labour starts. Some women can feel backache or cramps during this phase. Some women have bouts of contractions lasting a few hours, which then stop and start up again the next day. This is normal.

'Braxton Hicks' contractions occur all through pregnancy. They are tightenings of the muscle of the uterus and last for about 30 seconds. They are usually painless.

During the latent phase, Braxton Hicks contractions may become more noticeable and more frequent, lasting between 35 and 45 seconds. However some women may not notice anything happening at all.

The latent phase of labour can be long and tiring, especially for first time mums. However this is also a really positive and exciting time as your body prepares for active labour, and your baby readies itself to embark on the journey to meet you!

There are all sorts of things you can do to keep yourself busy during the latent phase, and its important to be in an environment which is calm, unhurried and peaceful in order to help your labour to establish.

You could...

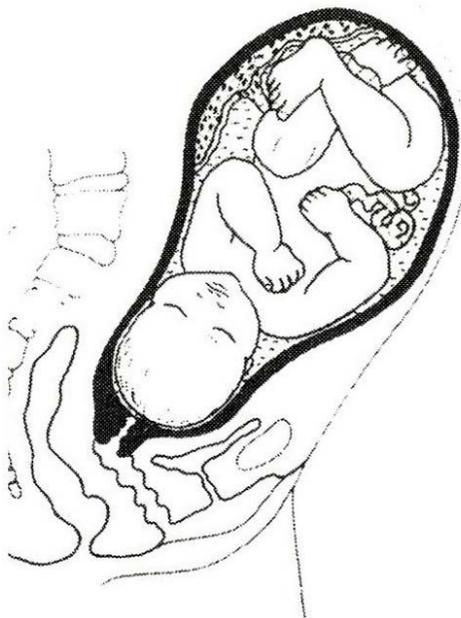
- Take a walk in the fresh air
- Watch that film you have been meaning to see
- Have a nice warm bath or relaxing shower – how about burning some scented candles or reading a book in the bath?
- A hot water bottle on your abdomen or lower back may help to ease discomfort, remember not to make it too hot and use a bottle cover or soft towel to wrap the bottle in
- Potter around the house and keep occupied – put some washing on, prepare a meal, or tackle the pile of ironing!
- Use some relaxation techniques...focus on your breathing with your eyes closed – take long deep breaths in and slowly exhale...could your partner, or a friend or relative do some massage on you? They don't need any special training, just let them know what feels good and how firmly to apply pressure.
- Make sure that you keep yourself hydrated – try some nice juices, flavoured water or sports drinks to give you energy
- Eat little and often and try to eat slow release carbohydrates such as brown bread and brown pasta to give you long term energy
- This is a really good time to use your birthing ball or try the different positions that you were maybe thinking of using in active labour – keep mobile and find out what

- feels good for you!
- Have you got a TENS machine? You might like to put it on now
  - If you are very uncomfortable, you can take some paracetamol (as long as you are not allergic) – remember to keep taking it every 4 hours for it to be at its most effective, but no more than 4 doses of 2 x 500mg tablets in a 24 hour period.

Remember to stay positive – a long latent phase is normal and you can do it!

## What is the 'latent' (early) phase of labour?

Before labour of the womb firm and



starts, the neck (cervix) is long, closed:

Even before  
the cervix can be  
get thinner:



labour begins,  
drawn up and

The 'latent' phase of labour is the very first part of your labour – the early part of first stage.

During the  
neck of the  
opens up to



'latent' phase the  
womb thins and  
about 3 – 4 cm.

The next part of labour is called the 'active' phase. This is when labour has become established.

Both the 'latent' and the 'active' phases take place during the 1st stage of labour.

Eventually, at the end of the 1st stage, the cervix has opened to 10cm and is described as being 'fully dilated':



## WHEN SHOULD I CONTACT TRIAGE?

- ◆ If your waters break
- ◆ Contractions last 40-60 seconds
- ◆ If you need support/reassurance from a midwife
- ◆ Strong regular contractions
- ◆ If you have questions
- ◆ Have an urge to push
- ◆ Fresh red bleeding
- ◆ If you can no longer cope at home
- ◆ If you're worried/don't know what to
- ◆ If baby is not as active as normal or very active
- ◆ If you want advice

### **Advice for partners for the latent phase (early labour);**

Labour can be quite an anxious time as well as exciting for you as the partner. To see the person you love in pain can make you feel like you cannot help her, but be assured that it is all a natural process and there are plenty of things you can do to help to relax her and make the early stage of labour more comfortable and less stressful.

## **Further Advice for Birth Partner:**

Make sure that your partner has a good meal in early labour if she wants it, to give her energy for the rest of labour.  
Have lots of her favourite snacks, films, comforts in the house for her.

Rubbing her lower back can be really soothing and helpful.  
Help to apply a TENS machine if you have one.  
Run her a nice warm bath. Listen to what she wants, some women will want lots of affection but others will want to be given some space.

Time contractions discreetly as they become more intense to have an idea of when to come in, it means that she does not have to time them herself but try not to mention it unless she asks; 'That was only 30 seconds!' after each contraction is not very helpful!

Make sure she drinks enough water to keep her hydrated in labour.  
Lots of encouragement and reassurance will make her feel much better, make sure she knows how well she is doing.  
In preparation; make sure all the bags are packed for when you do go to the hospital so there is not a big rush when you do go.

Remember that labour follows no rules about time, some are quick and some early labours can be very long.  
If things are well prepared and relaxing at home with good support then these things can really help your partner to relax and cope better with labour, which can make labour shorter and easier.

# Further Information

NHS Choices Website — [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

National Institute for Clinical Excellence — [www.nice.org.uk](http://www.nice.org.uk)

## Contact details:

Please contact the Telephone Triage Team directly on:

01903 285269

This number covers both Chichester/ Worthing patients.

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