Latent (early) labour

What is the latent phase of labour?

The latent phase of labour is the time when changes in the body start occurring in preparation for actual or established labour. The latent phase is difficult to describe as it varies widely amongst individuals in terms of character and duration. However, it is generally described as a period of time, not necessarily continuous, where there are painful contractions accompanied by thinning and opening of the cervix up to 4cm.

What happens during the latent phase of labour?

In the latent phase of labour, the womb begins to contract irregularly as it starts to co-ordinate the action of its muscle fibres and slowly adjusts its shape so that the cervix moves into the right position for birth. As time goes on, the contractions act upon the cervix itself, causing it to soften, thin, become stretchy and start to open.

What might I experience during the latent phase?

You may experience painful contractions. Some women find the pain of contractions in the latent phase so mild that they can hardly believe that actual labour will happen soon. Others are distressed by the pain of the latent phase and admission to hospital and regular painkillers are required. If this happens, don’t be worried – the pace and rhythm of labour varies greatly amongst individuals. If you are unsure whether what you are experiencing is normal, please call the Rosie birth centre for advice.

- It is common to have regular contractions for some hours which may then fizzle out completely. This is entirely normal and is your body’s way of preparing itself for labour in small stages. If this happens, have a lie down and try to sleep.
- You may see some blood-tinged mucus, also called a ‘show’. If the blood loss is more than a streak or you are concerned about the amount, you should contact clinic 23, or the birth centre immediately.
- Your ‘waters’ may go. This might be felt as a gush of fluid or a slow leak. If this happens, call the birth centre immediately.
- You may feel increased pelvic pressure due to the descent of the baby into the pelvis.
You may have increased vaginal discharge. However, if you are concerned that you may be leaking fluid, please call the birth centre.

How long does the latent phase last?

This length of this phase can range from six hours to two-three days. Nobody knows for sure why there are such big differences in duration between individuals. It tends to be longer in the first pregnancy.

What can help during the latent phase of labour?

- Make sure your companions help you achieve a calm, tranquil environment.
- Try relaxing in a warm bath.
- Distract yourself by listening to music or watching TV.
- If the contractions are becoming uncomfortable, try using a TENS machine. Remember to take this off if you have a bath or are using a birthing pool.
- Focus on your breathing during contractions. As you become aware of a contraction, breathe out slowly as if you are sighing. Then as the sensation builds, continue to blow away the pain by making your ‘out-breaths’ as long as possible. As you blow out, relax your body as much as possible.
- Consider using approved alternative therapies.
- Make sure you eat well at this stage in order to ensure you maintain your energy levels for labour. High carbohydrate snacks or meals are best.
- Drink plenty of fluids and make sure you are emptying your bladder regularly.
- Continue your normal routine. If it is night-time, try to rest and get some sleep. If it is daytime, potter about.
- Try to remain upright and mobile.

When should I contact the birth centre/ hospital?

Reasons to contact the birth centre/ hospital:

- You think your ‘waters’ have broken. This might be felt as a gush of fluid or a slow leak.
- You feel that the pattern of your baby’s movements has slowed significantly.
- You are bleeding.
- You feel labour is progressing. From time to time note the interval between contractions (from the start of one contraction to the start of the next) and how long they are lasting. However, don’t become a slave to your stopwatch; you simply need a sense of what is going on. In most cases, your contractions will let you know when it is time to take things more seriously.
- You would like some help/advice regarding latent labour.
Remember!

Labour is as much a psychological process as a physical one. The primitive part of your brain needs to be engaged in order for your contractions to work well and for you to benefit from the natural pain relief that the hormones of labour provide. Stress and an active, thinking brain prevent the primitive brain from producing the hormone oxytocin, which is important for a short and easier labour. This is why physical and mental relaxation, an air of calm and being informed about what to expect all help.

During the latent phase, your midwife may encourage you to remain at home or return home if you have come to hospital a little too early. This is because research has shown that fear and anxiety may inhibit the normal labour process. The best place for any woman in the latent phase of labour is therefore at home in familiar surroundings, supported by people she trusts. However, please feel free to contact your community midwife, the birth centre or the delivery unit at any time if you are concerned about any of the symptoms you are experiencing.