

Guide to preterm labor



Sometimes a baby can arrive early. Babies who arrive before 37 weeks of pregnancy are considered “preterm” and could be at risk for health problems. Here’s what you should know about preterm labor, so you know what to watch for.

What is preterm labor?

Preterm labor is labor that begins before the end of 36 weeks of pregnancy. Babies born between 22 and 37 weeks are called “premature.” They may need special care in a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU).

Certain factors can put you at higher risk for preterm labor

- Smoking, alcohol use or street drug use.
- Being having very high or very low weight.
- Lack of prenatal care.
- Health issues such as diabetes, high blood pressure or infections.
- Multiple pregnancy (twins, triplets or more).
- Family or personal history of preterm labor (let your doctor know).
- Short time between pregnancies.

What does preterm labor feel like?

Preterm labor can include symptoms like:

- Thick or bloody drainage from your vagina; may have a foul odor.
- Contractions in your lower stomach or low backache.
- Vaginal bleeding or leaking fluid (also called “water breaking”).
- Cramps that feel like a period.
- Pressure like baby is pushing down low in your pelvis.
- Nausea, vomiting or diarrhea

Call your doctor right away if you have any of the symptoms of preterm labor. You may or may not be admitted to the hospital. But you may need treatments like:

- IV fluids.
- Medicine to relax your uterus and stop labor.
- Medicine to help your baby’s lungs grow.

You may also be put on bed rest or asked to stop activity to help slow labor. If you give birth to your baby early, we have a team who may be able to help during your baby’s stay in the NICU.

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