

What is Preterm Labor?

PATIENT/FAMILY INFORMATION SHEET

What is preterm labor?

Preterm labor is labor that occurs before the thirty-seventh week of pregnancy. Preterm labor is a concern because the earlier your baby is born the more health problems the baby may have.

What causes preterm labor?

Many factors contribute to preterm labor. Some women are at greater risk than others, but it can happen to any woman without warning. The following factors have been linked to preterm labor:

- Prior episode of preterm labor or warning signs with current pregnancy
- Preterm birth or preterm labor in a previous pregnancy
- Dehydration
- More than one baby with current pregnancy (twins, triplets)
- Abnormal cervix or uterus
- Abdominal surgery during current pregnancy
- Serious infection while pregnant
- Bleeding in the second or third trimester
- You are underweight or weigh less than 100 pounds
- Exposure to DES as a fetus (drug given in the 1950's and 60's to pregnant women)
- Tobacco or recreational drug use
- Little or no prenatal care

What are the warning signs of preterm labor?

- Uterine tightening (your uterus will feel hard then soft) that may be painless, or regular uterine contractions (10 minutes apart or 6 or more in an hour)
- Mild abdominal cramps like a menstrual period, with or without diarrhea
- Constant dull or low back ache which does not go away with rest
- Pelvic or lower abdominal pressure
- Ruptured membranes (water breaks)
- Vaginal bleeding
- Increased or changed vaginal discharge (watery or mucus)

What should I do if I experience contractions or any of the other warning signs?

If you are experiencing uterine tightening, contractions, or note persistent pain or cramping, you should lie down, turn on your side and count your contractions for an hour. If your contractions occur more than once in ten minutes or you have 6 or more in an hour, you should call your doctor immediately. If you have had an episode of preterm labor already or a previous preterm delivery, do not wait, **call your doctor right away.**

If you are experiencing any of the other warning signs, then **call your doctor immediately or go to the hospital.**

What is the treatment for preterm labor?

The treatment for preterm labor will be determined by your doctor based on your pregnancy, your health, your medical history, and your symptoms. Sometimes labor can be stopped and other times the baby must be delivered. Treatment may include:

- Bed rest
- Hospitalization
- Intravenous hydration
- Medication to help slow or stop contractions
- Medication that helps to mature the baby's lungs
- Antibiotics if an infection is present
- Delivery if the labor cannot be stopped

Source: American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

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