



Belfast Health and
Social Care Trust

caring supporting improving together

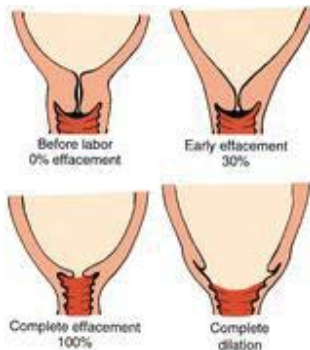
A photograph of a pregnant woman in a light blue cardigan, smiling and looking down at her belly. A man in a purple cardigan is embracing her from behind, also smiling. The image is partially covered by a large purple diagonal overlay.

Coping with the very early stage of labour

Patient Information

Labour is a journey which can take a long time. Every woman's labour is different.

This leaflet is designed to help you to help yourself cope with the early stage of your labour.



The three stages of labour

The first stage is the longest stage and ends when the neck of the womb opens to 10 centimetres/ is fully open.

It is comprised of the latent phase and the active phase,

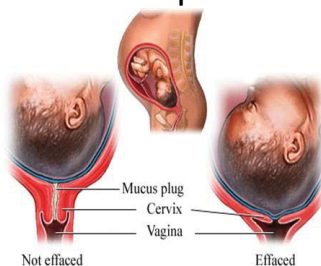
The second stage is when the baby moves down through the birth canal and is born.

The third stage is when the afterbirth is delivered.

What is the latent phase of labour?

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

During pregnancy the neck of the womb (cervix) is long, firm and closed, but even before labour starts the cervix can shorten and become thinner.



During the latent phase the neck of the womb shortens and opens (dilates) to about 3 or 4 centimetres. During the active phase, also called established labour the cervix dilates further up to 10 centimetres.

What happens during the latent phase of first stage?

During the latent phase the muscles of the womb (uterus) contract and this causes the neck of the womb to shorten and open to 3 or 4 centimetres. The latent phase can last several days or weeks before active labour starts. Some women can feel backache or cramps during this time. Some women have bouts of contractions lasting a few hours. They can start and stop several times. This is normal.

Braxton Hicks contractions happen throughout pregnancy, they are tightenings of the muscle of the womb which are usually painless and last about 30 seconds. During the latent phase Braxton Hicks contractions can become more frequent and last longer.

In the latent phase of labour contractions may start and stop. They may continue for several hours but not become longer and stronger. This is also normal.

If your contractions stop it 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. Many women find that having a vaginal examination during the latent phase may stop their contractions for a few hours.

This start – stop pattern is common in the latent phase of labour

In the active phase of labour contractions get **LONGER, STRONGER AND CLOSER TOGETHER** and continue until the baby is born

What can I do in the latent phase of labour?

It is best to try and stay as relaxed you can and distract yourself from focusing only on the contractions. It is a good idea to stay at home for as long as possible. This is because there is evidence that the further on in labour you are when you come into hospital, the more likely you are to have a normal birth. You are also more likely to remain relaxed and comfortable in your own home.

Remember the latent phase of labour can last a very long time especially for first time mums.

There are things you can do to help yourself, such as:

Pottering around the house * Taking a walk * Watching a DVD / video * Taking a warm bath or shower * Having a nap * Doing some relaxation * Keeping your breathing quiet and sighing out slowly * Asking your partner or labour supporter to give you a massage * Using a TENS machine * Putting a heat source, wrapped in a small towel on any areas that ache * Keeping as mobile as you can * Trying out different positions and using a birthing

ball * Drinking plenty of fluids * Eating little and often – carbohydrates like bread or pasta and sugary foods * Making love

Choose a supportive birthing partner who can be with you throughout your labour. Most importantly your birthing supporter should be someone who you can be totally relaxed and comfortable with.

Remember

Labour is a journey, and the early part of first stage can take a long time

This is normal

Quick labours are not always the easiest to cope with!

We hope that using some of the tips in this leaflet will help you through your labour



If you think you may be in early labour telephone your maternity unit (see numbers below) for advice

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False alarms are common with first time mums

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If you are not in established labour when attending our admission unit you may be advised to go home to await labour to establish

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We may also admit you for a period of observation. If you are not in established labour we still may advise you to go home after the assessment

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If your pregnancy is normal the best place to wait is at home

Royal Jubilee Maternity Service
Maternity Reception: 028 9615 1080
Admissions: 028 9615 0596

Mater Maternity Unit
028 9504 1555
028 9504 1556