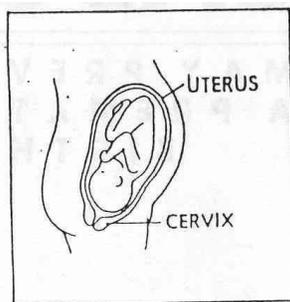




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Recognizing Premature Labor

A full term pregnancy takes about 40 weeks to complete. Babies born before 37 weeks may have problems breathing, eating and keeping warm.



Definition:

Premature labor occurs after the 20th week but before the 37th week of pregnancy. It is a condition in which uterine contractions cause the cervix to open earlier than normal. It could result in the birth of a premature baby.

Cause:

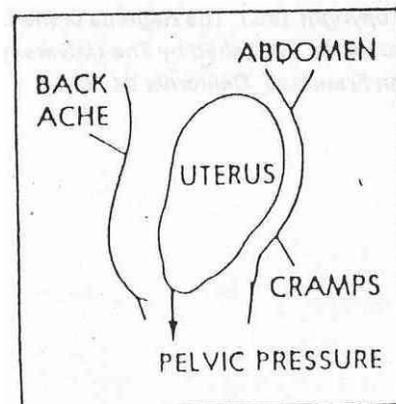
Although certain factors or reasons may increase a woman's chances of having premature labor, such as carrying twins, the specific cause or causes of premature labor are not known. Sometimes a woman may have premature labor for no apparent reason.

Prevention:

It may be possible to prevent a premature birth by knowing the warning signs of premature labor and by seeking care early if these warning signs should occur.

Warning Signs and Symptoms

- *Uterine contractions* that happen every ten minutes or more often, with or without any other warning sign.
- *Menstrual-like cramps* felt in lower abdomen. May come and go or be constant.
- *Low dull backache* felt below the waistline. May come and go or be constant.
- *Pelvic pressure* feels like baby is pushing down. Pressure comes and goes
- *Abdominal cramping* with or without diarrhea.
- *Increase or change in vaginal discharge*. More vaginal discharge than usual, or change into a mucousy, watery or light bloody discharge.



Uterine Contractions

It is *normal* to have some uterine contractions throughout the day. They usually occur when a woman changes positions, such as from sitting to lying down.

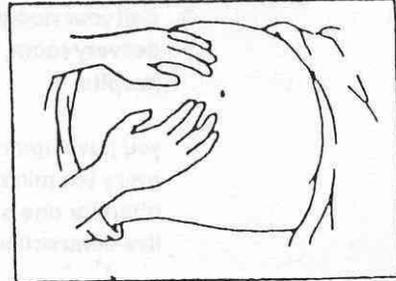
It is *not normal* to have frequent uterine contractions (every ten minutes or more

often for one hour). Frequent uterine contractions or tightenings may cause the cervix to begin to open.

Self-Detection of Uterine Contractions

Since the onset of premature labor is very subtle and often hard to recognize, it is important to know how to feel your abdomen for uterine contractions. You can feel for contractions this way:

1. While lying down, place your fingertips on the top of your uterus like this:
2. A contraction is the period of “tightening” or “hardening” of your uterus. If your uterus is contracting, you will actually feel your abdomen get tight and hard, and then feel it relax and soften when the contraction is over.



What You Should Do...

If you think you are having uterine contractions or any of the other signs and symptoms of premature labor:

1. *Lie down* tilted towards your side. Place a pillow at your back for support.
 - Sometimes lying down for an hour may slow down or stop the signs and symptoms
 - Do not lie flat on your back, because lying flat may cause the contractions to occur more often
 - Do not turn completely on your side because you may not be able to feel the contractions
2. *Check for contractions* for one hour
 - To tell how often contractions are occurring, check the minutes that elapse from the beginning of one contraction to the beginning of the next
3. *Call* your midwife if
 - You have uterine contractions every ten minutes or more often for one hour (more than five contractions in one hour) OR
 - You have any of the other signs and symptoms for one hour, OR
 - You have any spotting or leaking of fluid from your vagina

REMEMBER: Uterine contractions that happen every ten minutes or more often for one hour may cause the cervix to open.

REMEMBER: Do not wait for signs and symptoms to disappear. The symptoms may not go away, and waiting to call for help could result in the birth of a premature baby.

REMEMBER: Medication is available to help stop premature labor *if it is recognized early!*

Written by Marlo Herron, R.N.