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True Labor versus False Labor

About 20% of women having their first baby can have a period of "false" or "practice" labor lasting one to three days. Women who have had babies before can have repeated episodes of "false" labor. This can be very tiring and frustrating. This phase of labor is sometimes called prodromal labor or latent phase labor. During latent phase labor, the cervix gets softer, shorter, moves from the back of the vagina to the front and begins to dilate a bit (1 to 4 cm). The dilation can stay the same for many hours or days. Active labor is the time when the cervix begins to dilate steadily to 10 centimeters over a period of hours. Normally, your midwife will wait to come to your house until you are in active labor.

Because some false labor contractions can hurt or feel strong, it can make it hard to know whether to ignore them or pay attention to them, especially if you have had a baby before. Again, nothing is wrong. It is one of the normal experiences of some pregnancies and some labors. So what clues might you have to tell you whether you are in false labor or active labor?

In general, false labor contractions are longer and not as regular as active labor contractions. False labor contractions will be strong sometimes and weaker at other times. They may be regular for a few hours (even every two minutes apart) and then they space out. Or they can be two minutes apart, then seven minutes, then five minutes, etc. They tend to last 60 to 180 seconds. Some might be 45 seconds long and then the next one is two minutes long (120 seconds). False labor does not get consistently stronger every hour. False labor can go away when you soak in a warm bath or walk around or go to sleep. False labor tends to start in the evening or night and go away about mid-morning, although it can go on for several days.

In active labor, the contractions tend to be 30-80 seconds long and get consistently stronger each hour you have them. That means at the end of three hours they are much stronger than they were at the beginning. In active labor, the contractions do not go away or get weaker if you walk or soak in a tub. Most of the time the contractions start out farther apart and get closer and more regular as the labor progresses.

The problem with a long "false" labor (prolonged latent phase) is fatigue and discouragement for the pregnant woman. It is hard to get enough rest and most women wonder if it will ever end. Also, some women feel sick to their stomach (nauseated) with hours of latent phase labor and may not eat or drink enough to keep up their energy. Lack of food and lack of fluids can make it harder to cope and can interfere with the ability of the uterus to do its work properly. The best thing you can do if you have "false" labor is pace yourself. Rest frequently in small spurts. Drink at least one 8-ounce glass of fluids every hour. Drink milk shakes or have some yogurt every two to three hours (for protein and calories). Don't try to take in

too much at once. Just have a few sips or a few bites every 5-10 minutes until you've gotten everything down. If you feel like eating, fine. Eat lightly any food that sounds good. And remember, THIS TOO SHALL PASS. You will have your baby. What you are going through is normal.

If this is your first baby, wait for the contractions to get strong enough that you cannot ignore them or easily talk through them. Then start timing how many minutes it is from the beginning of one contraction to the beginning of the next contraction. That is how many minutes apart they are happening. Once they have been five minutes apart for at least two hours, call your midwife. If they get very strong and close together very quickly after they start, especially if your bag of water broke before labor started, call your midwife after an hour.

If you have had a baby before, call when you believe you should, based on your past history and experience.

Remember, **every labor and every baby is different.** No one can tell you for sure how your labor is going to be with this baby, whether it is your first or your sixth. If something doesn't seem right to you, call immediately and talk with your midwife.