

Premature labour and warning signs

Premature or pre-term labour is labour that starts before 37 weeks of pregnancy.

Women most at risk of going into labour prematurely are those who:

- have already had a premature baby
- are pregnant with twins or triplets
- have had three or more [miscarriages](#) or terminations
- [smoke](#)
- have an infection or certain medical conditions (such as high blood pressure, diabetes)
- are under or overweight
- have had previous treatment to their cervix.

The following may be signs of premature labour if they occur before 37 weeks. It is important to contact your Lead Maternity Carer (LMC) or the hospital (where you are booked to have your baby), straight away, if you have any of these signs. Your LMC will advise you what to do. Usually an examination and assessment of you and your baby are needed. Sometimes women are advised to stay in hospital for treatment.

Signs of possible premature labour

Loss of water, mucous or blood vaginally: There can be a vaginal discharge of water, mucus and/or blood. The breaking of the bag of waters around the baby can cause a gush of fluid. This is often one of the first signs of being in premature labour.

Abdominal cramps, pelvic pressure and lower backache: Signs of possible premature labour can start with abdominal cramps which are usually rhythmic, but may be constant. Pelvic pressure, which some women describe as heaviness in the pelvis may be present. Continuous backache can occur in labour, or backache that comes and goes. It can also move to your sides or front. (Many women have lower backache during pregnancy that is ligament not labour related).

Practice contractions: 'Practice-contractions' (called Braxton Hicks) are common during the later months of pregnancy. These are not usually regular and while they can be uncomfortable, they do not become progressively stronger or more painful. They can become more noticeable if you have a full bladder. Try going to the toilet. Braxton Hicks contractions may settle down if the bladder is emptied. If this doesn't help or you have regular tightenings, ring your LMC for advice.

Contractions in labour occur at regular intervals: The uterus tightens and becomes hard. Painful contractions occurring regularly every 15 minutes over a period of more than an hour may indicate the start of premature labour. To time the contractions, use your hand to feel the uterus tighten, become hard and then relax (as best you can). A contraction may last from half a minute to around 2 minutes. Time how long it takes from the beginning of one contraction to the start of the next one. Contact your midwife or doctor (LMC) if you think you are having regular contractions and could be in premature labour.

Abdominal discomfort: Some women experience nausea and [diarrhoea](#) which can cause bowel pain and discomfort. (It is common however, to have [heartburn/indigestion](#) and to feel pressure on your bladder during pregnancy).

Premature labour

Once you contact your LMC, you may be asked to go to the hospital for assessment. You will be seen first by a midwife, then a doctor who will assess whether you are in premature labour or not. Certain tests are carried out to determine this and monitor the well being of your baby. Sometimes women are given medication to attempt to stop the labour and/or medication to prevent infection to the baby. If a woman goes into premature labour before 34 weeks they are often given medication to improve the maturity of the baby's lungs in preparation for birth.

Warning signs of other pregnancy problems

Although most pregnancies proceed normally, some women develop complications of pregnancy. While it is common to experience changes and discomforts during pregnancy, it is important to know what to watch for and what to do.

If you have any of the following signs, contact your LMC (midwife, doctor or hospital birthing suite) straight away (day or night):

- any vaginal bleeding
- changes in baby(s) movements (less movements or change in the regular pattern)
- feel unwell
- a significant rise in your blood pressure and/or protein in your urine can be signs of pre-eclampsia (also called toxæmia).
- persistent or severe [headaches](#)
- problems with vision such as blurring, flashing or spots before the eyes
- bad pain just below the ribs on your right side or upper central abdomen
- unexplained vomiting
- sudden swelling of your face, hands and feet
- chills and [fevers](#), feeling hot and unwell with flu-like symptoms
- any other concerns about your pregnancy.

It is important to discuss any concerns you have about your pregnancy with your LMC, including a feeling that something is not quite right, as an urgent assessment can be organised for you and your baby.

Learn more

[A-Z on pregnancy and keeping healthy](#) Healthpoint NZ and Counties Manukau Health Maternity Services

[What are the risk factors for preterm labor and birth?](#) National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (US), 2013