

# Contractions During Pregnancy: What to Expect

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## Topic Overview

Regular contractions may mean that your uterine muscle is tightening (Braxton Hicks contractions) or that you are in labour. It may be hard to tell the difference between Braxton Hicks contractions and true labour. If there is any doubt, call your doctor.

### Braxton Hicks contractions

During the second and third trimesters of pregnancy, you may have episodes when your belly tightens and becomes firm to the touch, then relaxes. These are episodes of tightening (contraction) of the uterine muscles called Braxton Hicks contractions. These normal contractions may be mild, or they may be strong enough to make you stop what you are doing.

Braxton Hicks contractions can begin as early as the 20th week of pregnancy, but most often they start between the 28th and 30th week.

Braxton Hicks contractions can occur often during the 9th month, such as every 10 to 20 minutes.

Braxton Hicks contractions:

- Usually go away during exercise or activity. True labour pains continue or increase with activity.
- Are felt more during rest.

### **Preterm labour**

The length of a normal pregnancy is 37 to 42 weeks, measured from the date of the woman's last menstrual period. Preterm labour occurs before the 37th week of pregnancy. Before 20 weeks, preterm labour that leads to delivery is a miscarriage (spontaneous abortion).

Preterm labour is diagnosed in a woman who is 20 to 37 weeks pregnant and has regular uterine contractions. This means 4 or more in 20 minutes, or about 8 or more in 1 hour.

Call your doctor if you have had regular contractions for an hour. This means about 4 or more in 20 minutes, or about 8 or more within 1 hour, even after you have had a glass of water and are resting.

### **Early labour**

Early labour is often the longest part of the birthing process, sometimes lasting 2 to 3 days. Uterine contractions:

- Are mild to moderate and last about 30 to 45 seconds. You can keep talking during these contractions.
- May be irregular, about 5 to 20 minutes apart, and may even stop for a while.

In early labour, the cervix opens (dilates) to about 3 cm (1.2 in.).

First-time mothers may have many hours of early labour without the cervix dilating. You may go to the hospital and be sent home again until you begin active labour or your water breaks (rupture of the membranes).

### **Active labour**

The first stage of active labour starts when the cervix is about 3 cm (1.2 in.) to 4 cm (1.6 in.) dilated and is complete when the cervix is fully dilated and the baby is ready to be pushed out. During the last part of this stage (transition), labour becomes really intense.

Compared to early labour, the contractions during the first stage of labour:

- Are more intense.
- Occur more often, about every 2 to 3 minutes.

- Last longer, about 50 to 70 seconds.

You may feel restless or excited during active labour. Now is the time to be at or go to the hospital or birthing centre. If your bag of waters (amniotic sac) has not broken before this, it may now. If you have taken a labour class and learned how to do special breathing during contractions, you will want to begin the special breathing now.

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## **Credits for Contractions During Pregnancy: What to Expect**

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## Cervical Effacement and Dilatation

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### What are effacement and dilatation?

As labour nears, the cervix begins to thin or stretch (efface) and open (dilate) to prepare for the passage of the baby through the birth canal (vagina). How fast the cervix thins and opens varies from woman to woman. In some women, the cervix may efface and dilate slowly over a period of weeks. A first-time mother often will not dilate until active labour begins.

Late in your pregnancy, your health professional may manually check (wearing sterile gloves) how much your cervix has effaced and dilated.

### Effacement

As the baby's head drops down into the pelvis, it pushes against the cervix and causes the cervix to relax and thin out, or efface.

See a picture of cervical effacement (See figure 1 in appendix).

Throughout your pregnancy, your cervix has been closed and protected by a plug of mucus. When the cervix effaces, the mucus plug is loosened and passes out of the vagina. The mucus may be tinged with blood. This passage of the mucus plug is called "show" or "bloody show." You may or may not notice when the mucus plug passes.

Effacement is described as a percentage. For example, if your cervix is not effaced at all, it is 0% effaced. If the cervix has completely thinned, it is 100% effaced.

### **Dilatation**

After the cervix begins to efface, it will also begin to open (cervical dilatation).

Cervical dilatation is expressed in centimetres from 0 to 10. Zero means that the cervix is closed, and 10 means that it is completely dilated.

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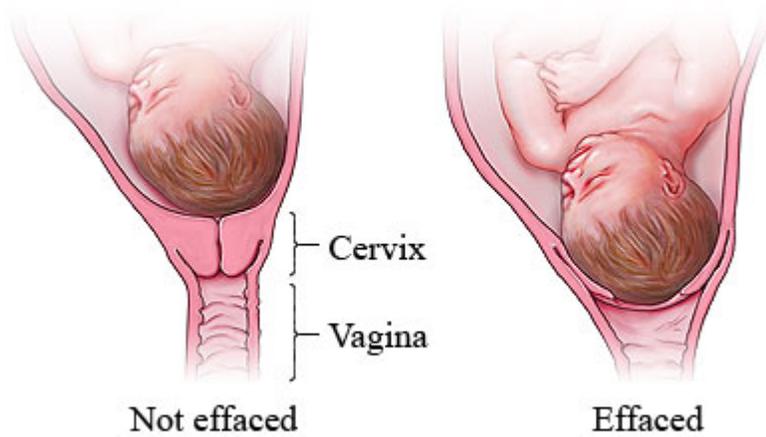
## **Credits for Cervical Effacement and Dilatation**

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## Topic Images

Figure 1

### Cervical effacement



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As labour nears, the fetus's head drops down into the pelvis and pushes against the cervix. The cervix begins