Recognizing Signs of Preterm Labor

WHAT IS PRETERM LABOR?

Preterm labor happens when labor begins **before 37 weeks of pregnancy**. It can lead to preterm birth, which may increase health risks for babies, especially if they are born very early.

According to the CDC, about **1 in 10 babies in the U.S. is born preterm**, and Black women are at higher risk of preterm birth compared to other groups. Recognizing warning signs early and getting medical care right away can make a real difference.

✨ WHY IT MATTERS

Preterm birth can affect a baby's breathing, feeding, temperature regulation, and development. The earlier a baby is born, the higher the risk for complications. Early recognition and treatment of preterm labor may:

- Delay birth
- Allow time for medications that support baby's lung development
- Improve health outcomes for both parent and baby

♥ WARNING SIGNS OF PRETERM LABOR

Call or visit your provider **right away** if you have any of the following before 37 weeks:

- **Regular or frequent contractions** (tightening or hardening of the belly every10 minutes or more often)
- **Lower back pain** that is dull, constant, or comes and goes
- **Pelvic pressure** (feels like the baby is pushing down)
- **Menstrual-like cramps**
- **Change in vaginal discharge** (watery, mucus-like, or bloody)
- **Fluid leaking from the vagina** (could mean your water has broken)
- **Abdominal cramps** with or without diarrhea

Trust your instincts. If something doesn't feel right, it's always okay to call.

? WHO IS AT HIGHER RISK?

Preterm labor can happen to anyone, but risk may be higher if you:

- Have had a preterm birth before
- Are pregnant with twins or multiples
- Have high blood pressure, diabetes, infections, or uterine/cervical conditions
- Experience high stress or limited access to prenatal care
- Smoke, use substances, or have poor nutrition

Even without risk factors, **preterm labor can still occur**, which is why knowing the signs is important for everyone.

✨ WHAT TO DO IF YOU NOTICE SYMPTOMS

1. **Stop what you're doing and rest,** preferably lying on your side.
2. **Drink water,** dehydration can trigger contractions. Always check with your provider first.
3. **Call your prenatal provider immediately** or go to the hospital.
4. **Do not wait** to see if symptoms go away.

You will never be "bothering" your provider by calling. Early care matters.

WHERE TO LEARN MORE

CDC – Preterm Birth:
cdc.gov/maternal-infant-health/preterm-birth

NICHD – What Is Preterm Labor?

March of Dimes – Preterm Labor & Birth

HOW PRETERM LABOR IS CHECKED

Your provider may:

- Monitor contractions
- Check your cervix
- Test for infections
- Do an ultrasound
- Perform a fetal fibronectin (fFN) test

Treatment depends on how far along you are and what's causing symptoms.

CAN PRETERM LABOR BE PREVENTED?

Not all preterm births can be prevented, but these steps may help lower risk:

- Attend all prenatal appointments
- Treat infections promptly
- Manage chronic conditions (like high blood pressure or diabetes)
- Reduce stress and ask for support
- Avoid smoking, alcohol, and drugs
- Rest when needed and listen to your body

AFTER A PRETERM LABOR SCARE

Many people experience symptoms that turn out not to be preterm labor and that's okay. A "false alarm" is still a success if it means you and baby were checked and are safe.

Continue to:

- **Track symptoms.**
- **Follow your provider's guidance**
- **Ask questions and advocate for your care**