

When you are in early labor, you may feel any of the following:

- Anxious
- Uncertain
- Relieved
- Scared
- Excited
- Nervous
- All of the above at once!

Rest assured, they are all normal and common feelings you may experience at this very special time.

It's important that you try to relax, play any early labor signs down (unless you are concerned) and maintain as much normality as possible, as this is the beginning of what will likely be a long, exhausting, and intense process.

How long does early labor last for?

How long you are in early labor for varies between each woman and each pregnancy due to many things, including the position of the baby, hormones, how you choose to labor (upright / lying down) etc. Some women don't even realize they are in early labor and are surprised to find they are progressing quicker than they thought. For some, early labor can go on for several days or more and can become a frustrating time, however it is important to keep yourself distracted in this instance.

What is early labor?

In early labor, the cervix moves to the anterior position, softens and effaces (thins) and begins to dilate. Early labor dilation is from 0 centimeters to 4 centimeters, after which time it becomes active labor. Some women will experience a mucus plug or 'show' (in whole or parts of it) coming away in early labor, as a result of the cervix moving and opening.

How helpful is early labor in regards to labor progressing?

Early labor is definitely a very important part of the labor process, even if it feels like it's taking forever and is resulting in nothing but anxiety for you! It's easy to become disappointed when early labor doesn't step up as fast as we would like, but your body is using this wonderful early labor process as crucial preparation. Especially for your cervix, this early dilation is paving the way to reach 10 centimeters for your baby to be born! Early labor contractions are not like a headache, they don't just make you feel uncomfortable with no result. Early labor contractions are your body working very hard, building up to stronger, longer contractions. So this is very little reason to feel disappointed!

Tips & Suggestions

1. Avoid telling family and friends!

You're probably already tired of people asking you if and when the baby has arrived, so you can imagine how frustrating things could get if you tell them you are in early labor. This often heightens the anticipation, comments like, *'You're still going?'* or, *'Gees that's a long time, shouldn't they induce you / put you out of your misery by now?'* which can be very discouraging. Often this can result in mum feeling even more determined to accept intervention to hurry labor along due to everyone else's anticipation.

It's important to understand what early labor really means – especially that it could take days – so if you can, avoid telling family and friends at least until labor is established (active labor which is 4-7cms).

2. Rest, rest, rest!

You may have heard that going for huge walks or swims in early labor is beneficial, but this is not ideal. You'll only exhaust important energy stores that you'll need for what is yet to come during labor. Also pools and baths are not a good idea in early labor – the weightlessness works against gravity and can result in slower or stalled labor. This is why if you are having a water birth, if you can, it's a good idea to wait until 7 centimeters (transition) until you jump in the water. If you want to use water for pain relief, jump in the shower instead. However if the water is calling you in active labor, this is fine!

If your labor begins at night, rest as much as you can. It may be hard to sleep if you're excited, but you'll need as much rest as you can get for the more demanding times in your labor – using it all up now is not a good idea. Depleting what energy you have now can lead you to feeling exhausted much earlier and this can lead to interventions later if you don't have any energy to go on and / or push your baby out.

3. Start some projects you have been meaning to do

Early labor is a great time to have some distractions, especially in the form of projects you have been meaning to do. Write in your journal, scrapbooking, painting, file away photos or recipes, and rearrange things you have been meaning to in a while. This way time will pass a little faster and you will have achieved something at a time when you might feel like you aren't achieving much at all! Even though you most definitely are!

4. Keep eating and drinking

Keep up your water levels to avoid dehydration, having regular toilet trips too, to make room for baby to come down. Food wise, you want to eat foods that are going to give you lasting energy, so carbs are a great option. Some women might say that they don't like to eat prior to labor, out of concern they will only throw up, but it's very important for your energy levels and for baby to eat in early labor. Some women will throw up regardless due to hormones – I'm sure most of us would rather throw up food than bile! Some women also like to eat spicy food or curries to hurry things along but be warned, if it normally gives you diarrhea imagine what that might be like later in labor. Same with castor oil – often this causes diarrhea for the pregnant mother.

Belly Belly's Support Panel Midwife, Brenda Manning, suggests: "If you don't think you will remember, ask your partner to remind you to drink at least 300mls of water every couple of hours to avoid dehydration, which can result in fatigue and a poorly functioning

uterus. Eating and drinking during labor has been shown to reduce the total length of labor by as much as 90 minutes. Eat light, easily digested food."

5. Stay at home as long as possible

Unless you are concerned, don't feel safe or feel you cannot cope at home for much longer, staying home as long as you can will keep you off the clock in hospital. What I mean by this is as soon as you arrive in hospital, they will be keeping an eye on how long you have been in labor for and if you do not progress as fast as they would like (usually they are after around 1cm an hour which is not very generous) then you may sooner be offered inductions or other interventions to hurry things along. This may sound enticing, however any interventions that are introduced where there are no problems evident for mother and baby only offer more opportunity for even more intervention or complications as a result of the intervention. Check out our induction article here to read about what's involved once you are induced or augmented (labor stimulated or sped up).

6. Make sure your bags are packed and ready to go!

This might be a silly one to mention, many mums have their bags packed well before their estimated due date.

7. Keep yourself distracted

Hopefully you've planned some things to do in early labor prior to now; having a chat to your partner earlier so he can arrange some activities for you would be great! Perhaps you could hire your favorite movies, eat out at your favorite restaurant, have a massage, go out for a picnic, get your nails done – anything that will take your mind off things for a while is of great benefit in early labor.

8. Don't feel disappointed

If your labor is taking longer to establish than you hoped, don't feel disappointed! Your body is still working very hard and women sometimes find that when they have long early labors, they have a shorter active labor, which is not so bad at all!

Remember, feeling anxiety or stress can slow or stall your labor – and that's the last thing you want to do! Enjoy this very special time before your baby arrives – you've got a great big job ahead of you.