

# Coping with the Latent Phase of Labour

Information for patients



Leeds  
Maternity Care

This information leaflet explains the 'Latent phase of labour' as well as advising when to seek advice and helpful coping mechanisms.

## What is the 'latent' phase of labour?

Before established (active) labour begins the **cervix** (neck of the womb) is **firm, long and closed**. During the latent phase of labour this starts to **soften, thin out and dilate** (open up).

Many will experience contractions that are **irregular, short lasting** and **mild** in strength. When labour is establishing most people will experience contractions that are stronger, longer lasting (lasting 40 seconds or more) regular and are opening (dilating) the cervix.

The latent phase of labour can **last several days** before established labour starts. This is normal. Some women experience '**period**' type cramps and **backache** and some will experience **short periods of contractions** lasting a few hours, which can stop and start up again the following day.

**Remember, the latent phase of labour can last a long time, especially for first time mums, a 'start-stop' pattern of contractions is common in the latent phase. Research evidence suggests that staying calm and being relaxed at home during the latent phase is linked with fewer childbirth interventions.**

## Coping strategies for the latent phase of labour

Find something to **distract yourself** from the contractions, something that you would do normally to **help you feel relaxed**. This might include:

- Going out for a walk
- Breathing in gently and sighing out slowly through each contraction
- Taking a nap
- Having a warm bath or shower
- Listening to a playlist of your favourite music or watching a DVD
- Try sitting on your gym ball if you have one and leaning against your bed or a chair
- Ask your birth partner to do some massage
- Remaining upright and mobile can help you progress more quickly as this will allow gravity to work on your side
- Drink plenty of fluids and eat little and often. Water, energy drinks and carbohydrates such as bread, pasta, rice and cereal will help to keep you hydrated and build and store your energy supplies
- Some women find it helpful to use a TENS machine
- Taking paracetamol. If you are normally able to take paracetamol you can have 2 tablets every 4 to 6 hours, but not more than 8 tablets in 24hours, the same as you can if you are not pregnant

**DO NOT DELAY** contacting Maternity Assessment Centre if you think you are in the latent phase of labour and you are under the care of a consultant, for example if you have had a previous caesarean section, or if you have any complications that you have been advised to let MAC know directly about when you call, for example Group B Strep.

## Preparation is the key

No birth is ever the same but having an understanding of what is happening to your body and knowing what **you** can do to help **yourself** will have a **positive impact** upon your birth experience. Have the confidence that your body is perfectly designed to birth your baby.

Over time your contractions will become longer lasting, stronger and more intense. If this is your first baby, you normally need to be experiencing a minimum of two to three contractions every ten minutes that last for 45 seconds to a minute, before you are in the active phase of labour. It is possible for active labour to start more suddenly, particularly if you have already had a vaginal birth. Remember every labour is different, so it is best to stay relaxed and be prepared for whatever happens.

It is a good idea to try to stay at home until your labour is established but you do need to ring the Maternity Assessment Centre and speak to a midwife in the following situations:

- If your baby's movements slow down
- If you think you are going into labour before 37 weeks
- If your waters break

- If you are bleeding vaginally
- If you have a headache, fever or are generally unwell
- When you are having strong, regular contractions
- If you are finding it hard to cope at home and need some advice

## **Useful telephone numbers**

- **MAC LGI**  
Telephone: 0113 392 6731
- **MAC SJUH**  
Telephone: 0113 206 5781
- **Community Midwifery Office**  
Telephone: 0113 206 5329







## What did you think of your care?

Scan the QR code or visit [bit.ly/nhsleedsfft](https://bit.ly/nhsleedsfft)

**Your views matter**



© The Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust • 1st edition (Ver 3)  
Developed by: Laura Walton - Lead Midwife Maternity Strategy  
Produced by: Medical Illustration Services  
MID code: 20210429\_001/MH

LN004928  
Publication date  
11/2020  
Review date  
11/2023