



Your Guide to Labour and Birth



In this handout, you will learn the answers to common questions women have about labour and birth.

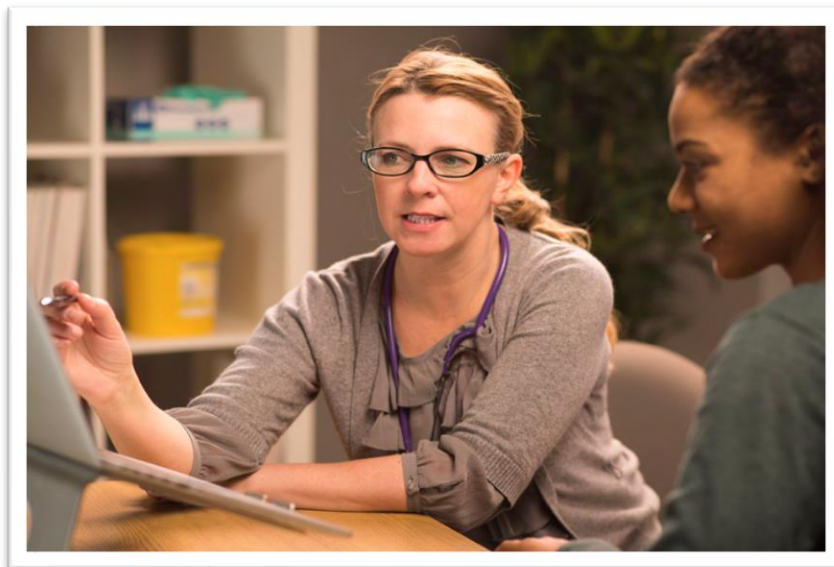
Labour and birth are different for each woman. It is normal to feel excited, happy, sad, nervous, and afraid all at once!

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1. What needs to be done to get ready?

- Learn about the process of labour and birth.
- Think about comfort measures you want to try as you move through the stages of labour.
- Call or check the website of your place of birth ahead of time to find out about their policies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Find out about the way admissions are done, parking, food for the support person, and items to bring, etc.
- If giving birth during the COVID-19 pandemic worries you, talk to your health care provider about it. Discuss ahead of time how to manage pain and other questions you may have. During the pandemic, some procedures may be different than what you expect. The best birth plan is a flexible one that encourages a healthy birth and reduces risk of virus spread.
- Learn about breastfeeding.
- Learn about services and community programs in your area that help parents. Check to see if they are open right now (drops-ins, breastfeeding support, **dads' groups**, **food banks**, **community closets**, etc.) Check to see what is offered online right now.
- Ask what the hospital or birth centre will provide and what you need to bring with you. Pack a small suitcase or bag 3 to 4 weeks before your due date (see section on [What to Pack](#)).



2. What to pack before you go to the hospital or birthing unit

For You

- ☐ Health Card
- ☐ Pen and paper
- ☐ Underwear
- ☐ Toiletries (toothbrush, hairbrush, lip balm, hairdryer, etc.)
- ☐ Sanitary pads
- ☐ Nightgown, slippers and robe
- ☐ Loose fitting clothes
- ☐ Hospital registration card (*if you have*)
- ☐ Phone numbers for friends & family
- ☐ Camera
- ☐ Phone and charger
- ☐ Light reading
- ☐ Your favourite music

For Your Baby

- ☐ Approved car seat
- ☐ Clothes and hat
- ☐ Diapers and wipes
- ☐ Thin blanket
- ☐ Warm blanket (for winter)

For Your Support Person

Pack enough for the entire stay. Labour and birth can last 24 hours or more. The stay for a Caesarean birth may last a few days.

- ☐ Pajamas or comfortable clothes
- ☐ Toiletries
- ☐ Food that will keep well
- ☐ Drinks
- ☐ Medication
- ☐ Nicotine patches or gum (*if needed*)
- ☐ Money for parking (*if needed*)
- ☐ Money for vending machines or hospital cafeteria (*if open*)
- ☐ Cell phone and charger
- ☐ Book and music



3. Information regarding your support person if you are having a baby during COVID-19

Hospitals and birth centres in Ontario have put extra policies in place to help keep you and your baby safe during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is best to go to your planned place of birth where care providers and your health records are available.

Here is some information to help you know what to expect.

- To reduce spread of infection, you may only be allowed one support person with you during labour and birth with no substitutes and no visitors.

Your support person:

- May need to wait in a different area while you are admitted.
- Will be asked questions to find out if they may have COVID-19. It is important to tell the truth to keep everyone safe. If your support person has or may have COVID-19, they will not be able to be with you for the birth.
- Will need to wear protective equipment. This may include a mask and a gown.
- Will need to stay in your room. They will not be able to leave and come back, even for just a few minutes. This is to **limit everyone's chances of coming in contact with COVID-19.**
- May not be able to stay with you if you have a caesarean birth.
- May not be able to stay long after the birth. The hospital or birth centre will let you know what is possible.



Some tips:

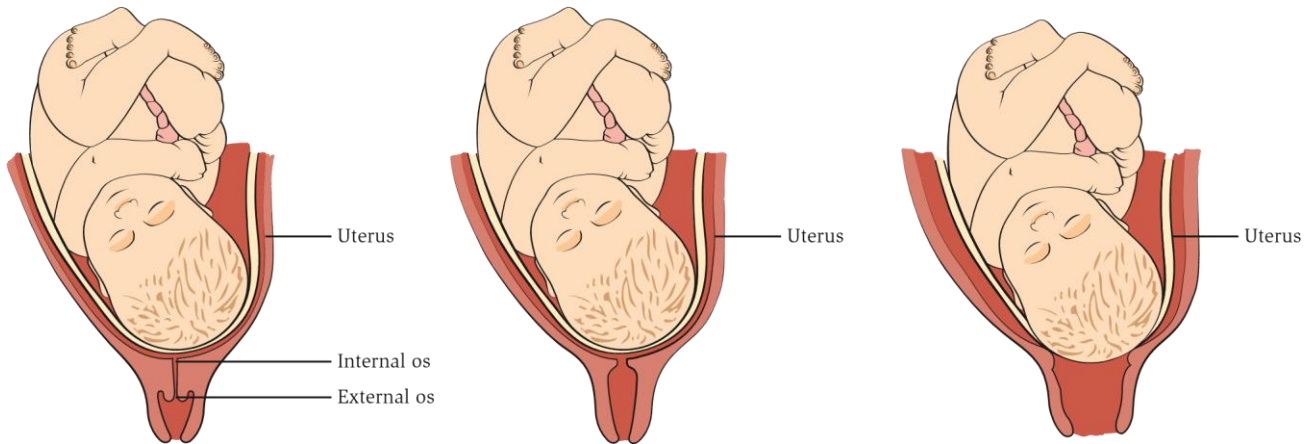
- During your pregnancy, you and your support person can take extra precautions to avoid getting COVID-19. This includes keeping a distance from others and washing your hands often.
- Consider having a backup support person in case your support person becomes ill with COVID-19 before the birth.
- Call or check the website of your planned place of birth to find out about their policies. This may include:
 - How admissions are done. In some places the support person may need to drop you off and wait in a separate area while you register.
 - Food options for the support person. Find out if food is provided or can be purchased. Most places will not allow ordering in.
- Your support person may have to bring clothes and everything they may need for the entire stay. This includes food that will keep well, drinks, clothing, toiletries, and medications. If they smoke, they may need nicotine patches or gum. Labour and birth sometimes last 24 hours or more. The stay for a caesarean birth may last a few days.
- Make sure you put plenty of money in the parking meter if this applies to your place of birth.
- If you live in a remote community, your support person will need to travel with you to the place of birth. Find out what is possible from your local health authority.
- If you are worried about giving birth during the COVID-19 pandemic, talk to your health care provider about mental health supports in your area.

The policies may be different at your place of birth and may change as the **pandemic evolves. Your health and your baby's health are a priority. Hospitals and birthing centres are safe places. Your health care team is here to help.**

4. What is labour?

Labour is the work your uterus does to help the baby come out. For many hours, your uterus will tighten (contract), rest, and then tighten (contract) again. This makes the opening of the uterus (cervix) get thinner (efface) and open (dilate).

The Thinning and Opening of the Cervix



Un-effaced cervix

Effaced cervix

Dilated cervix

Efface: Your cervix gets thinner before your baby comes out.

Dilate: Your cervix will open to about 10 cm (4 inches) for your baby to come out.

A contraction occurs when the uterus gets tight, rests, and then gets tight again. **You will feel many contractions when you are in labour. The “pain of childbirth” comes mainly from the contractions. When your cervix opens to 10 cm, your contractions and your pushing will move the baby down the birth canal (vagina) and out into the world.**

Labour and birth are a natural and important process for your body. Your hormones are preparing your body and your baby for the transition from the womb to the outside world. Trust the process.

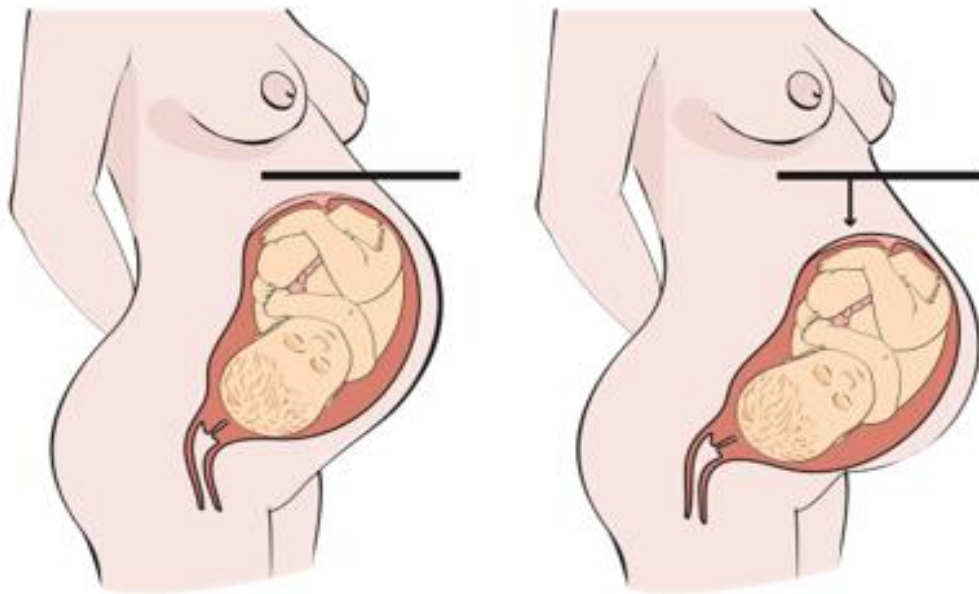
For more information, see *Pathway to a Healthy Birth* at www.nationalpartnership.org/research-library/maternal-health/pathway-to-a-healthy-birth-booklet.pdf

5. What are the signs of labour?

There are some normal signs that tell you that your labour may begin soon. Most women go into labour within a week of their due date. If you have signs of labour before you are 37 weeks pregnant, go to the hospital or birthing centre right away.

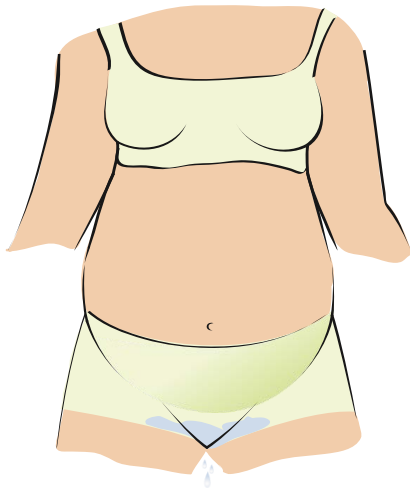
(1) Lightening

Near the end of your pregnancy, your baby will move down. When this happens you will be able to breathe better. You will feel less burning in your chest and throat after you eat. You will have to pass urine more often. If this is your first baby, this may happen 2 to 3 weeks before you go into labour. If this is not your first baby, this may not happen until closer to the time you will give birth.



(2) Mucous Plug

While you are pregnant, you have a thick mucous plug in your cervix. As **the baby's birth gets closer, your cervix begins to thin and open, and the plug may come out.** If this happens you will notice thick mucous on your underwear, or in the toilet, or you may not notice it at all.



(3) Bloody Show

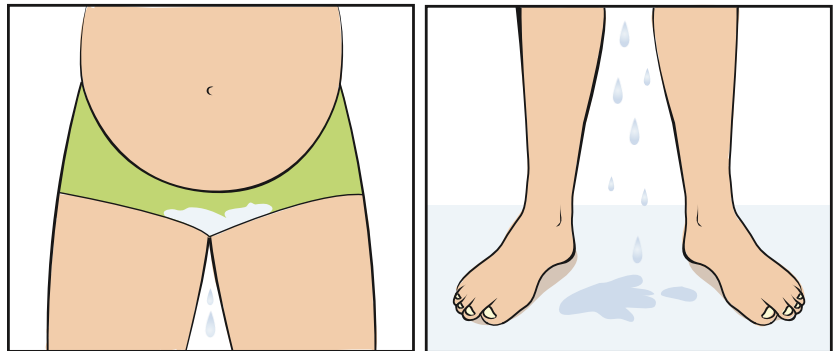
You may notice a pink, red, or brown discharge a few days before labour or during labour. This is called bloody show. It is a sign of your cervix changing shape and the mucous plug coming out. Tell your health care provider when this happens. The baby drops lower near the end of pregnancy.

(4) Bag of Water Breaks

Your baby is inside a bag of water (amniotic sac) in your uterus. When the baby is ready to be born it is normal for the bag of water to break. This may happen before labour starts, early in labour or when the baby is almost ready to be born. When it happens, you may have a little or a lot of water leaking from your vagina. Sometimes women do not know whether this is water from their uterus or urine. If you are not sure, call your health care provider.

When your bag of water breaks:

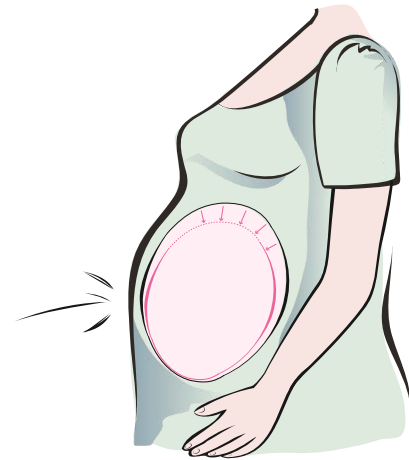
- Write down the time that your bag of water broke.
- Look at the colour of the water (it should be clear).
- Notice if there is a smell (it should not smell).
- Do not use a tampon – use a pad in your underwear or towel if needed.
- Call your health care provider or hospital for instructions.



(5) Contractions

Late in your pregnancy you may have contractions (uterus tightens, rests, and tightens again) that are very strong. They may come and go for hours or days and then stop.

These contractions are helping your womb (uterus) get ready for birth and are called pre-labour or Braxton-Hicks contractions. The chart below will help you know when you are really in labour.



Pre-labour contractions

- Do not get stronger.
- Do not become regular.
- Go away with walking.
- Feel strongest in front.
- There is no bloody show.
- Tend to go away with rest.

True labour contractions

- Get stronger.
- Become regular and closer together.
- Get stronger when you walk.
- May begin in back and move to front.
- Bloody show is usually present.

6. How do you time your contractions?

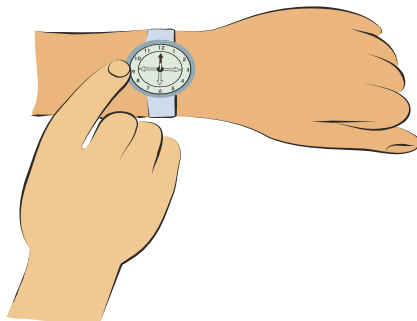
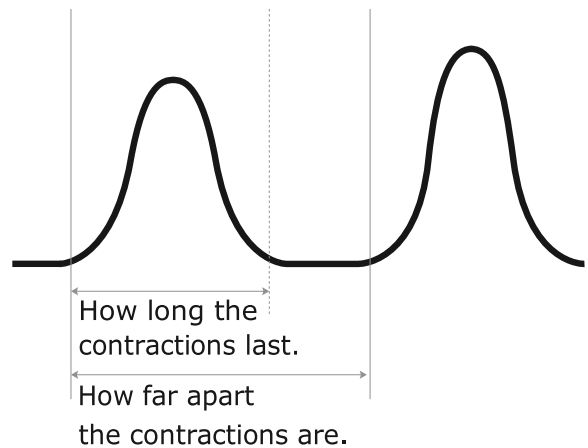
By learning how to time your contractions, you will know when you are in true labour. Time your contractions when the contractions come closer together and/or the contractions get stronger or when your water breaks.

It is also helpful to time for at least 3 contractions in a row to see what the pattern is.

Write down:

- When each contraction begins and ends.
- How far apart the contractions are.
- How long each contraction lasts.
- How strong each contraction feels.

Use a clock or watch with a second hand. To find out how long the contraction lasts, start timing from the beginning of the contraction to the end of the same contraction.



To find out how far apart contractions are, time the beginning of one contraction to the beginning of the NEXT contraction.

Labour Record

Start Time	Stop Time	Length of Contraction	Frequency of Contractions

7. When should you go to your place of birth?

- If you are bleeding from your vagina.
- When your contractions are 5 minutes apart and are also increasing in intensity (your health care provider may ask you to go to the hospital earlier).
- When your water breaks.
- You can use the acronym TACO to remember to record:
 - Time when the bag of water broke.
 - Amount of fluid.
 - Colour of fluid.
 - O odour of fluid.
- If you are planning a home birth, contact your midwife when you have signs of labour.
- It is best to stay at home during early labour. Resting, taking a shower, going for a walk or watching a movie are all great ways to cope with early labour.



What to consider if you have or may have COVID-19

Hospitals and birth centres in Ontario have put extra policies in place to help keep you and your baby safe during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is best to go to your planned place of birth where your care providers and your health records are available.

If you have COVID-19 or think you have it, call your place of birth to talk to them about the best way to get there. **If you don't have a car, they can help** you decide whether an ambulance is needed.

A health care provider will assess you when you arrive at your place of birth. The following are general guidelines for people who have or may have COVID-19.

- From what we know now, there is a small risk that COVID-19 may be passed from the parent to the baby during pregnancy. Babies may also be infected with the virus after birth by close contact with someone who has COVID-19.
- You may be asked to wear a mask during your labour. If you cannot wear a mask, talk with your health care provider. You will also need to wash your hands often with soap and water or use hand sanitizer. This will help lower the risk of infecting your support person, your health care providers and your baby after birth.
- Your support person will be asked questions about COVID-19 when arriving at the place of birth. It is important to tell the truth to keep everyone safe. If your support person has or may have COVID-19, they will not be able to attend the birth. Read the handout [Having a Baby During COVID-19 – Labour Support](#).
- Having COVID-19 is not a reason alone to change your birth plan, for example, being induced or having a caesarean birth.

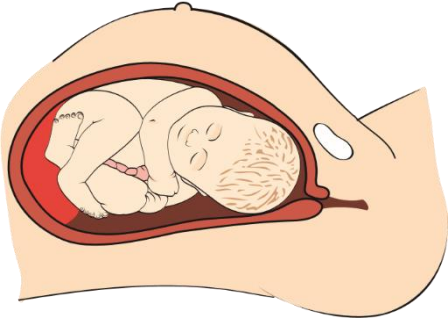
Some tips:

- Find a support person who is well and does not have COVID-19. Have a backup support person in case your planned one becomes unwell.

The policies may be different at your place of birth and may change as the **pandemic evolves. Your health and your baby's health are a priority.** Your health care team is here to help.

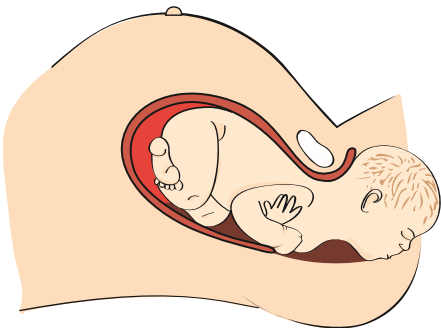
8. What are the four stages of labour?

Labour can be divided in four stages:



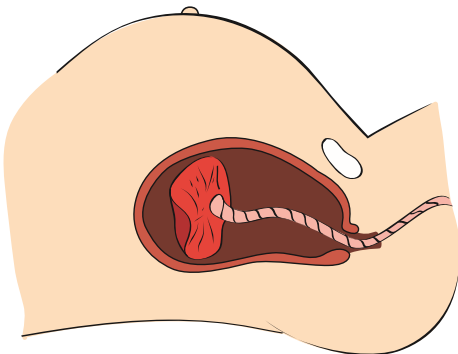
Stage 1: Labour:

Your contractions will slowly get stronger. They will happen more often and last longer. By the end of this stage your cervix will be thinner (effaced) and will open (dilate) to 10 cm. Your baby will move down into your pelvis.



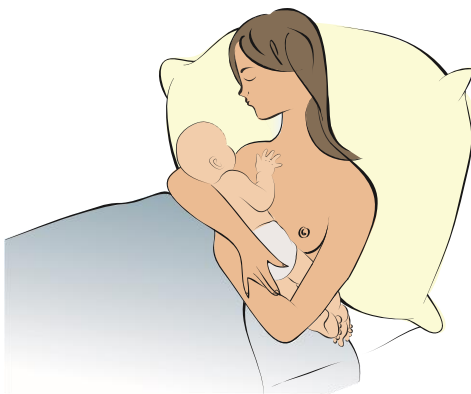
Stage 2: Birth of Baby:

You will have more contractions. They will be very strong. You will feel the need to push. Your baby will be born.



Stage 3: Release of Placenta:

Not long after your baby is born, you will feel some mild contractions again. You will then be able to push out the placenta. This is usually a quick process. If the placenta does not come on its own, your health care provider may need to remove it for you.



Stage 4: Recovery:

During this stage you will be resting after labour and birth. You will be spending time with your baby. Skin-to-skin contact with your baby will help you bond with your baby and will keep your baby warm. It will help your baby find your breast and latch on to your nipple. This is a good time to start breastfeeding.

9. What can help you stay comfortable during your labour?

Here are some tips that you and your partner can use to help you learn to relax. This may make labour more comfortable and will help the baby move down into the birth canal.

Learn breathing techniques such as how to:

- Breathe slowly and rhythmically in through the nose and out through the mouth.
- Take light (shallow) breaths in and out of your mouth.
- Take short quick breaths in and out of your mouth.

You can learn the breathing techniques in prenatal classes or ask someone to show you. Practicing your breathing techniques alone or with your coach will help you to prevent hyperventilating.

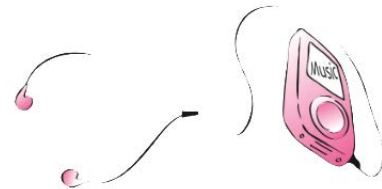


Try to find something to look at or think about during your contractions.



Ask your support person to massage different parts of your body. If your lower back hurts, ask your support person to apply steady pressure on your lower back.

Listen to music.



Drink juice or water, or chew on ice chips. Eat small amounts of food.

Go to the toilet to pass urine at least every hour.



Have a shower or bath.

Some women want medications to help reduce the pain. Talk to your health care provider about the kinds of pain medications that might help. Ask questions about the benefits and risks to you and your baby, as well as the alternatives, so that you can make an informed decision about using them or not.

10. What are some comfortable positions for labour?

Try some of these positions to find the ones you like. It is important to change positions during labour. Doing so will help you to stay comfortable and will help your baby move down.



11. What medical procedures are sometimes used during labour and birth?

There are several medical procedures that your health care provider may use. Sometimes, babies need some help to be born. During your prenatal visits talk about what medical procedures your health care provider may use during labour and birth. This will help you to be aware of the risks and benefits, for you and your baby, of each procedure as well as the alternatives so you can make an informed decision during labour. When in labour, choose the method(s) that works best for you and your baby.



Induction

Labour may need to be started for you because the baby is overdue, for special health reasons or because the bag of water breaks but there are no contractions. This can be done with special medication (oxytocin). If your bag of water is not broken, your health care provider may suggest breaking it for you before starting the medication.

Augmentation

Breaking your water and/or the use of oxytocin can help if your labour is slow to progress.

For more information about induction and augmentation of labour, go to *Oxytocin: To Help Start or Speed Up Your Labour*

<https://resources.beststart.org/product/e50e-oxytocin-brochure/>

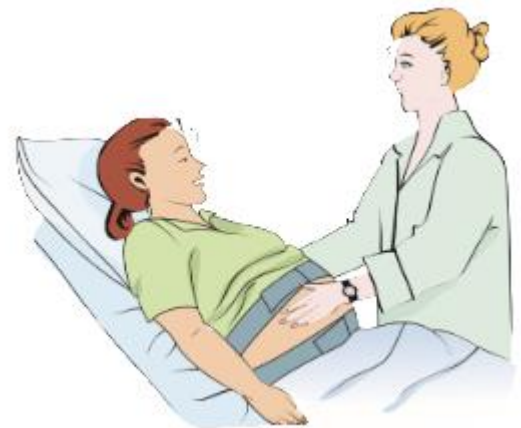
Pain Medication

- Intravenous Infusion (IV) may be used to give you fluids, medication, or pain medication through your arm.
- An Epidural may be used to give you pain medication through your lower back. An epidural anesthetic numbs the lower part of your body.

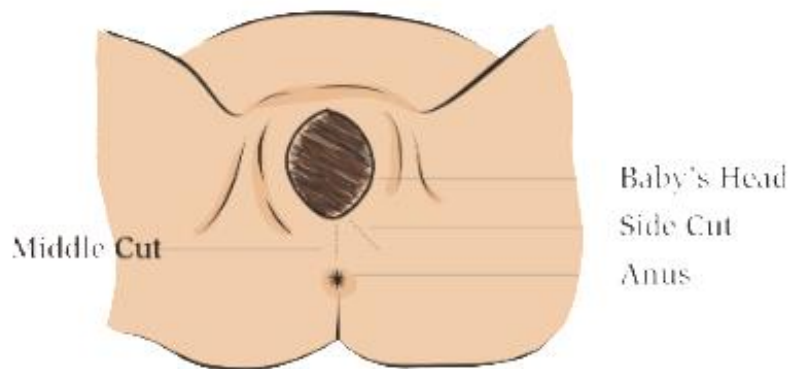


Fetal Monitoring

- **During labour, your baby's heart rate will be checked.**
- Your health care provider will use a hand-held stethoscope called a Doppler.
- **A machine called a "fetal monitor" may be used to listen to the baby's EV heartbeat.**
- Monitoring also includes recording and measuring the contractions.

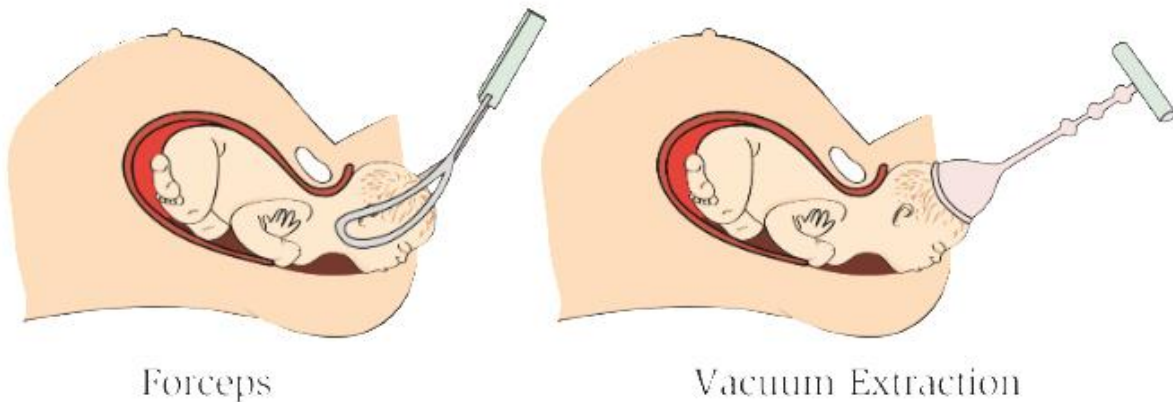


Episiotomy



- An episiotomy is a small cut to make the opening of the vagina bigger.
- An episiotomy is not a routine part of labour.
- Freezing is usually given first.
- You will need to have stitches.

Forceps and Vacuum Extraction



- Forceps are a spoon-like tool that fits around the baby's head.
- Vacuum extraction uses a soft cup that fits on top of the baby's head and is attached to a machine.
- They are used when:
 - The baby is not in good position to be born.
 - The baby needs to be born quickly.
 - The mother is very tired **and can't push any more.**

Caesarean Birth (C-section)

This involves the baby being born through a cut in your abdomen and uterus.

There are many reasons why a caesarean birth may be recommended:

- The baby is very big.
- The baby is lying with its legs down instead of its head.
- Special health reasons.
- Problems with the umbilical cord or the placenta.
- The baby needs to be born quickly.
- Labour is not progressing normally.

Having a caesarean birth may be unexpected. Your health care provider will let you know if a C-section is needed to help your baby be born safely.

12. What can you expect right after the birth?

Right after the birth of your baby, place your baby skin-to-skin.

Skin-to-skin means your baby is wearing just a diaper (and maybe a hat) and his bare skin is against your bare chest and tummy. Your baby will be wiped dry and a blanket will keep you both warm.

Even if your baby isn't ready to breastfeed right away, it is good for him to stay skin-to-skin without interruption for at least one to two hours, or until he is ready to feed.

Being skin-to-skin will help your baby:

- Be calmer.
- Breathe better.
- Have normal blood sugar.
- Stay warm.



Holding your baby skin-to-skin also promotes:

- Better milk flow and production.
- Bonding (the process of developing an emotional connection to your baby).

Skin-to-skin contact at any time has benefits for both you and your baby. Fathers, partners, and support persons can also hold baby skin-to-skin. Skin-to-skin cuddling and breastfeeding also help if your baby has to have a blood test or other painful procedure.

Take extra precautions if you have or may have COVID-19. Please read the fact sheet *Having a Baby During COVID-19 – Infant Feeding* at <https://resources.beststart.org/product/v04e-having-a-baby-during-covid-19/>

Your baby will have an exam by a doctor or midwife to assess their overall health (called Apgar score). Other interventions will be:

- Vitamin K injection in **baby's** thigh.
- Antibiotic eye ointment.

- Heel-stick blood test to check for a variety of disorders (called newborn screening test).
- Hearing screening test.

You will have a medical exam. The health care team will make sure that you're doing well and to answer your questions. Interventions can be:

- Check that the placenta is delivered.
- Check your uterus by pressing lightly on your stomach.
- Check your vaginal bleeding.
- If you had an episiotomy or tear, or if you had a caesarean birth, you will have stitches.

Information for people who have or may have COVID-19

- Your health care provider may ask for your consent to have the baby tested for COVID-19 after birth using a swab to their nose or throat. Talk with your health care provider to help you understand the risks and benefits of having the baby tested.
- You will be able to have your baby skin-to-skin if you are both well enough.
- **If you're planning to breastfeed and you're well enough**, read the fact sheet Having a Baby During COVID-19 – Infant Feeding at <https://resources.beststart.org/product/v04e-having-a-baby-during-covid-19/>
- If you are sick and choose to be separated from your baby to reduce risk, your care providers can help you make a plan.
- After the birth, your baby may be able to be in the same room as you. You will need to wear a mask all the time. Current advice is to stay at least two metres away, when you are not providing direct care for your baby.
- You and your baby will be able to go home once well.
- At home, it is recommended that you wear a mask when you are close to your baby until you no longer have COVID-19. It will be important to wash your hands well before all baby care. Your local public health unit can give you more information about this.
- Stay in touch with your health care provider, especially during the first two weeks after birth. Call to arrange a check-up visit for you and your baby. If you do not have a health care provider when you go home, contact your hospital or birth centre for information on where to go for follow-up.

13. Who are your important contacts?

Once home with your baby, look for ways to connect with people who can support you. If you are feeling lonely, depressed, or anxious, let your health care provider know. Contact your local public health unit to see what supports are available in your area. To find your local public health unit, go to www.health.gov.on.ca/en/common/system/services/phu/locations.aspx.

Personal Help

Name and Title partner, family, friends, neighbours, peer support, community drop-ins, blogs, etc.)	Contact Information phone numbers, emails, web links, and addresses

My Health Care Providers

Name and Title (doctor, midwife, nurse, nurse practitioner, lactation consultant/clinics, dietician, doula/labour support person, etc.)	Contact Information (office number, cell numbers, emails, web links, addresses)

Questions for your health care provider:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Emergency (Fire / Police / Ambulance): 911

Telehealth Ontario: 24/7 free medical advice at 1-866-797-0000 or
www.ontario.ca/page/get-medical-advice-telehealth-ontario

Your local public health unit: 1-800-267-8097 or
<http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/common/system/services/phu/locations.aspx>

FASD Ontario: This website offers information on alcohol and substance use
www.fasdON.ca

Bilingual Online Ontario Breastfeeding Service: Search for breastfeeding
services near you www.ontariobreastfeeds.ca

14. Additional resources

Some resources to know more about labour and birth

Healthy Birth Practices

The Lamaze Healthy Birth Practices are designed to help simplify your birth process with a natural approach that helps alleviate your fears and manage pain
www.lamaze.org/healthybirthpractices

Normal, Healthy Childbirth for Women & Families: What You Need to Know **A woman's guide to understanding normal, healthy birth and how it can improve the health of her baby and her health**
<https://mana.org/pdfs/Normal-Healthy-Childbirth.pdf>

Oxytocin: To Help Start or Speed Up Your Labour

What you need to know to make an informed decision regarding oxytocin induction or augmentation during labour.
<https://resources.beststart.org/product/e50e-oxytocin-brochure/>

Pathway to a Healthy Birth

Information about birth hormones and their job of guiding you and your baby on the path to a healthy birth
www.nationalpartnership.org/our-work/resources/health-care/maternity/pathway-to-a-healthy-birth-booklet.pdf

Preterm Labour Signs & Symptoms Brochure

Provides critical information on how to recognize preterm labour signs and symptoms and when to seek help
<https://resources.beststart.org/product/e06e-preterm-labour-signs-symptoms-booklet/>

OMama

A website and app that connects women and families to trusted, evidence-informed healthy pregnancy, birth and early parenting information for Ontario
www.omama.com

Some resources to know more about getting ready for baby

My Breastfeeding Guide

Find information and answers to questions you may have as an expectant parent or as a new parent.

<https://resources.beststart.org/product/b20e-my-breastfeeding-guide-booklet/>

Sleep Well, Sleep Safe

This booklet is for parents of infants from 0-12 months and for all who care for infants.

<https://resources.beststart.org/product/k49e-sleep-well-sleep-safe-booklet/>

What to Expect in the First Three Months – Information for New Parents

This handout will provide you with important information on what to expect in the first three months after your baby is born.

<https://resources.beststart.org/product/k82e-what-to-expect-in-the-first-three-months-booklet/>



Acknowledgements

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