

Patient Information

The Latent Phase of Labour

How do I know if I am in the early stages of labour?

This can be very confusing for you. This leaflet has been produced to help you and give you the confidence in yourself and in what is happening to you and your baby.

The latent phase is the beginning of the first part of your labour. It is a period of time that will not necessarily be continuous and is unique to each woman. Some women will have backache and cramps or have bouts of contractions that may last a few hours and then stop and start up again the next day. This is perfectly normal.

The duration of the latent phase of labour can be variable. It may last for 24hrs or more and can be exhausting for you. It helps if you can stay as relaxed as possible during this part of your labour and remain at home in comfortable surroundings as long as you can. This is an exciting time even if it is tiring.

Remember that every woman's labour is different and sometimes it can take a long time. This is perfectly normal.

This leaflet will answer some of your questions and give you some of suggestions to help you through the early part of your labour.

What are Braxton Hicks contractions?

Braxton Hicks can occur all through the late stages of your pregnancy. They are the tightening of the muscle of the uterus which last for 30 – 60 seconds and may be several times an hour, several times a day.

How can I tell the difference between Braxton Hicks and real labour contractions?

Labour contractions are noticeably longer, more regular, increase in frequency and are generally more painful than Braxton Hicks contractions.

What is happening during the latent phase of labour?

Your contractions will feel uncomfortable but they may not be regular. They will be sharp but short lasting. They will stop and start, last for 30 – 40 seconds and may continue for several hours. This is normal.

The neck of the womb (the cervix) has been long and closed during your pregnancy. These first contractions, along with the Braxton-Hicks contractions that you may have already experienced, help to soften the neck of the womb and prepare your body for active labour.

As the contractions become closer together, longer and stronger, the neck of the womb will also begin to shorten and then open up. Once the cervix is 4cm dilated and the contractions are regular (every five minutes) and lasting for at least a minute, then labour has become active. ?

What should I do once the latent phase of labour begins?

If you think your labour is starting then you may want to seek advice from your midwife. **You can ring the hospital at any time** on any of the **following numbers** for support and advice from a midwife.

01926 495321 Ext 4552 Or 4553

Details of your call and the advice that you receive, will be recorded in case you ring back with another query. You can ring back at any time of the day or night whenever you need further advice.

How can I help myself?

There are many ways of helping yourself to cope through these first hours of the latent phase of labour.

It is important to try and remain relaxed. Keep your breathing deep, steady and slow during a contraction. This will prevent you from using extra energy. Once the contraction is wearing off, close your eyes and allow your body to rest before the next one.

Take a warm bath or shower, at regular intervals. You will find the warmth of the water soothing and relaxing.

You may want to call your birthing partner for added support during this time. He/she will give you support and reassurance to help reduce your anxiety. It will be useful if your partner massages your back to reduce, backache, helps you to relax and supports you in any alternative positions that you may adopt. Your birthing partner can also make other family members aware of the latent phase of labour and encourage them to support you rather than raise concerns unnecessarily at this stage.

It is also important to remain active without exhausting yourself during this time. Take a walk out with your partner, stopping if you need to during a contraction. Remaining upright will assist gravity and help your baby to descend into the pelvis. Rocking your pelvis and swaying your hips can also assist you. If you have access to a birthing ball, use it regularly as this too can alleviate any discomfort.

Ensure that you maintain your energy levels by eating small, light meals containing carbohydrates such as bread, pasta. The use of high energy drinks will also add to your energy requirements and keep you hydrated.

It is safe to take simple pain killers, such as Paracetamol. You can take two (500mg) tablets, every 4-6hrs. Do not take more than 8 tablets within a 24hr period.

Some women who have hired a TENS machine put it on during the latent phase.

When should I go into hospital?

If you have tried all of the above suggestions and your contractions are now regular and painful, you may want to ring the hospital again. The midwife will advise you depending on the information that you give.

If you are invited to go into the hospital then take your bag with you. However, if labour has not yet established you may be asked to return home. This decision will be based on the findings of a thorough examination. Labour wards are not always the best environment for women who are in the latent phase of labour.

We hope that this leaflet will have prepared you for the onset of labour and help you to be more relaxed and less fearful of the onset of labour.

If you have any further concerns or questions, do not hesitate to contact your midwife.

Bibliography

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National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (2007) Intrapartum Care of healthy women and their babies during childbirth Guidelines Nice London

Regional Midwifery Forum (2006) Latent phase of labour Midwifery Guidance

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As a key provider of acute healthcare and as an employer, the Trust has a statutory obligation to promote and respect equality and human rights. This is set out in various pieces of legislation including: Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, Disability Discrimination Act (2005), Sex Discrimination Act (1975) and the Age Discrimination Act (2006)

Our information for patients can also be made available in other languages, Braille, audio tape, disc or in large print.

PALS

We offer a Patient Advice Liaison Service (PALS). This is a confidential service for families to help with any questions or concerns about local health services.

You can contact the service by the direct telephone line on 01926 600 054 or using the phone links which are available in both hospitals or calling in at the office located in the main entrance at Warwick Hospital.