

# Stages of Labor

There are three stages of labor. Dilation of the cervix occurs during the first stage of labor. The first stage is divided into three phases: the prodromal phase (early labor), the active phase and the transitional phase. The average duration of the first stage of labor for women having their first baby is 12 to 16 hours. The second stage of labor starts when the cervix is fully dilated and is completed with delivery of the baby. Pushing may last from one contraction to two to three hours. The third stage is completed with delivery of the placenta and usually takes less than 15 minutes.

## The First Stage of Labor

### Early Labor

The prodromal or early labor phase lasts from the start of labor until the cervix dilates to four centimeters. Contractions are slow to become regular, but become more frequent with increasing strength and duration. It is best to stay home during this phase if possible.

#### The Mother

If contractions begin at night and if they are not too strong or close together, try to get more sleep. Do not eat anything too heavy.

During early labor, many women prefer sitting in a comfortable chair with your head, arms and legs supported. Walking for brief periods of time may distract you from the contractions. Try not to wear yourself out too early by walking too much.

Do not start breathing patterns until you feel that you need them. Breathing should be deep, slow and even.

#### The Support Person

Be calm and have confidence in yourself. Remember that your presence and companionship are your most important contributions.

At this stage of labor, just a few words of encouragement or praise for your partner are important. Keep calm, avoiding over excitement or dwelling on the upcoming delivery.

During the trip to the hospital, remain calm and concentrate on driving carefully. There is plenty of time. You should learn the route (and an alternate route) in advance, the approximate time it will take, where to park, and what entrance to use night or day. In case you may be unavailable to drive your wife/partner to the hospital, arrange for an alternate person. If you have children at home, have a couple of potential sitters available. Remind your wife/partner to relax and to breathe slowly and evenly with the contractions. This may be difficult in the car, and she may need extra encouragement during the trip.

Good Samaritan admissions in the main lobby is open 6 am to 10 pm. If you go to the hospital during the night, use the Emergency Room entrance to the hospital.

## Active Labor

During active labor, contractions are closer, stronger and more prolonged. This phase lasts from four centimeters to seven centimeters. Contractions are progressively stronger and closer together, 3 to 4 minutes apart and last 40 to 60 seconds.

#### The Mother

You are preoccupied with labor and no longer feel like talking. Each contraction requires deep concentration.

Your position is important for comfort and your ability to relax. Move from side to side frequently. Remember to empty your bladder.

#### The Support Person

A quiet, subdued environment helps you relax. Avoid bright lights, excessive talking or movements in the room. Speak in a calm, reassuring voice between contractions.

Offer frequent words of encouragement. Such comments as, "you are doing well!" or "good work!" are a must. The use of positive suggestions such as "your contraction is at its peak and will soon be letting up" will help.

Help her with her breathing. This is a good way to aid her relaxation and divert her attention from the uterine contractions. Remind her to use slow deep breathing as long as possible, only changing to more rapid upper chest breathing when absolutely necessary. She should breathe in through her nose as much as possible to prevent dryness of the mouth.

Women in labor appreciate small gestures of comfort like a back rub, a cool wet washcloth to wipe the face and neck, and moistening the lips and mouth with ice chips and sips of water.

## **Transition**

Transition is the most demanding period of labor. Contractions are long, strong, and frequent. Transition lasts from dilation of 8 centimeters to 10 centimeters.

### **The Mother**

You may be irritable or discouraged. You may feel out of control and cry. It helps to have the labor partner for breathing. It is common to experience shaking. Some women experience amnesia during this phase and turn focus inward.

### **The Support Person**

Your partner may panic and lash out at you. She will need your help now more than ever. Help with each contraction. Watch for nausea, holding her breath, and an urge to push. Remember “pant, pant, pant” to avoid these symptoms.

Remind her that transition is short. Relief comes with the pushing stage. Help her take contractions one at a time. Use the periods between contractions to rest since they will be very short. She may sleep between contractions and wake up confused when a contraction begins. While maintaining eye contact, breathe with your wife/partner. If she panics and momentarily loses control, speak to her in a firm tone, saying “breathe with me, breathe in and out, keep it up, etc.” until the contraction is over.

If your wife/partner is bothered by low back pain, apply counter pressure with your hand. Do not leave your wife/partner alone in transition.

A catch in her breathing or a sensation of being unable to breathe, along with the urge to push, may signal the onset of the delivery stage. Make sure the staff knows she feels like pushing. Urge her to continue her breathing pattern until a nurse or physician give permission to push.

## **The Second Stage: Delivery**

The pushing stage brings mixed feelings of surprise at the power of the urge to push and joy that birth is imminent. Pushing may last two to three hours for first time mothers.

### **The Mother**

Pushing will bring relief from the labor. Breathe deeply before each push. Shaking is common during delivery and after delivery. Burning and stretching sensations are common as the baby moves down the birth canal. It is the home stretch at the end of a marathon - the “light at the end of the tunnel”. Contractions may become less frequent but are stronger. There is a natural urge to bear down with the contractions.

### **The Support Person**

Your wife/partner must really concentrate. She can be easily confused by lots of voices, so let her nurse or physician give the instructions about pushing. Help with the counting. Stay close to her and soothe her between contractions. Offer cool washcloths and ice chips. Encourage her.

## **The Third Stage: The Placenta**

### **The Mother**

Fatigue and relief are common reactions after delivery. Shaking may continue during this stage. After delivery of the placenta, the uterus will shrink to the level of the umbilicus. The nurse will massage the uterus to prevent excessive bleeding.