

Stages of Labor

Each labor experience is different. Your experience with labor will be unique to you. The following chart describes the process of labor, how it feels and what you can do to cope.

| Stage or Phase | What Happens During Labor | How it Feels | How to Cope |
|---|---|--|--|
| <p>First stage Early phase</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ cervix effaces (thins) and dilates (opens) ■ may occur gradually over several hours or days ■ most effacement, and dilation from 1 to about 4 to 6 cm ■ may last 14 to 20 hours or more for first labor ■ contractions last 30 to 45 seconds and come every 5 to 30 minutes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Each phase feels different. ■ Contractions are mild to strong. ■ You may feel comfortable between contractions. ■ You may feel nervous, nauseated or excited. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Try to relax and work with the rhythm of your body. ■ Time your contractions. Pay attention to long your contractions last (duration) and how close together they are (frequency). ■ Walk or do light activity. Take breaks to rest. ■ Nourish yourself. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Drink water, fruit juices or tea. Drink at least 6 ounces each hour. — Eat lightly. Eat foods that are easy to digest, like Jell-O®, toast and soup. |
| <p>Active phase</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ dilation from about 4 to 6 cm through 8 cm ■ typically lasts 3 to 5 hours ■ contractions last 45 to 60 seconds and begin every 3 to 5 minutes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Contractions are stronger. ■ Your attention is focused inward. ■ You may have a dry mouth, chills and nausea, or feel sweaty. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Concentrate on staying relaxed between contractions to conserve your energy. ■ It is important to move and switch positions throughout labor to help your baby descend and get in a good position for delivery. |

(over)

| Stage or Phase | What Happens During Labor | How it Feels | How to Cope |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Transition phase | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ dilation from 8 to 10 cm ■ can last 30 minutes to 2 hours ■ contractions last 60 to 90 seconds; there are 30 seconds to 3 minutes rest in between contractions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Contractions are intense and close together. ■ You may have hiccups, nausea, vomiting, shaking and pelvic pressure. ■ You may feel like giving up. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Take one contraction at a time. |
| Second stage (pushing) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ uterus pushes baby out ■ typically lasts 20 minutes to 2 hours or longer ■ contractions last 45 to 60 seconds and begin every 3 to 5 minutes ■ Your health care team may recommend waiting to push until the baby is lower, in a better position, or until you feel the urge to push. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ You may experience a “rest period” before you feel an urge to push. You might get a surge of energy. ■ Pushing can feel like pressure, stinging, burning, or pain. ■ Pushing can take a long or a short time. This depends on the position of your baby, the effects of medicine, and how well you are able to push. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Focus on using your abdominal muscles to push down, out and away. ■ Your health care team will help suggest positions and techniques to aid you in your pushing efforts. |
| Third stage (after birth) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ the placenta separates from the uterine wall and is expelled ■ typically lasts 3 to 30 minutes after your baby’s birth | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Contractions are less intense and may even be easy while you expel the placenta. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Push gently when your health care provider asks you to do so. |