**Know what to expect in early labor**

**Oh baby! You just had your first contraction.**
Is this it? Should you grab your birthing bag and head out?

You may be in **early labor** — the phase that comes before **active labor**.

### WHAT HAPPENS IN EARLY LABOR?

- Hormonal changes continue to prepare mom and baby for birth and breastfeeding
- Pre-labor (irregular on and off contractions that occur during the last weeks of pregnancy) gradually gives way to early labor
- Contractions may start and stop several times before developing a rhythm
- Contractions generally start off mild, may last 30-45 seconds and occur every 20 minutes or so apart, then become longer, stronger and closer together
- Cervix dilates to 6 cm to prepare for childbirth as the baby moves down into your pelvis
- Early labor is most often the longest phase, more than half of the total labor time

### THERE ARE BENEFITS TO STAYING HOME DURING LABOR AS LONG AS POSSIBLE:

- Gives you more flexibility to move freely—which can reduce the risk of medical interventions.
- Helps increase the labor hormone, oxytocin—which allows the cervix to thin and open.

### HOW CAN YOUR PARTNER OR DOULA SUPPORT YOU?

- Offering comfort, physical care and reassurance
- Helping time contractions — Lamaze’s Pregnancy to Parenting app has a contraction counter
- Keeping your mind off labor with simple activities, like playing games

### STAY COMFORTABLE BY:

- **Resting and relaxing**
- **Drinking plenty of fluids and eating what appeals to you**
- **Going for a short walk**
- **Moving around or changing positions**
- **Focusing on slow, deep breathing**
- **Using a warm pad or ice pack on your lower back**
- **Reading a good book or watching TV**
- **Asking your doula or partner for a gentle massage**

### HOW DO I KNOW WHEN TO GO?

Active labor begins when contractions are roughly 3-5 minutes apart, last 1 minute and have been that way for 1-2 hours.

However, listen to your body. If you feel it’s time to go to your birthing facility, follow that instinct and/or call your care provider first—especially if your water breaks.

Learn more about early labor in a Lamaze class, in-person or online, so you can be prepared!