

The Stages of Labor and Birth

What to expect

As you get close to your due date, your body begins to prepare for the birth of your baby. The charts in this handout show what happens and what to expect during labor and birth. We hope your baby's birth is a wonderful and memorable event!

If you think you may be in labor, first call your provider's office. If you cannot reach your provider, call your Labor and Delivery unit.

About the Charts

Charts on the next 3 pages show the 4 stages that usually occur in the hours before, during, and after a vaginal birth. These charts show the body changes and feelings of each stage. You may have all or some of these body changes and feelings.




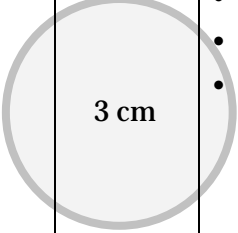
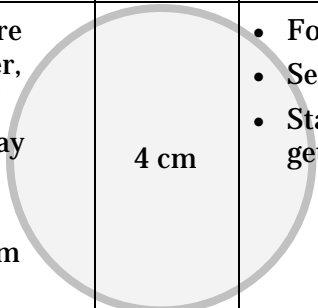
Stage 2 of labor is the “pushing” stage.

- **Stage 1** most often begins with contractions. This stage lasts until your cervix is dilated to 10 centimeters.
- **Stage 2** begins when your cervix is fully dilated. This is called the “pushing” stage. You push when your uterus contracts. This pushing continues until your baby is born.
- **Stage 3** begins after the birth of your baby. It lasts until your placenta is delivered.
- **Stage 4**, or recovery, lasts for several hours after the birth of your baby. This is when your body adjusts to the physical and emotional changes that come with giving birth.

Most likely, you have coping methods you know work best for you when you are in a painful, stressful, or challenging situation. Be sure to use these same coping skills during your labor. To learn more, see the chapter “Comfort Measures During Labor,” pages 55 to 56 of this book.

Also review the “Actions” sections of these charts for some ideas on how to cope with labor and how your birth partner can help you. Try some of our tips, and think of other ways to help you to cope during labor.

Stage 1

	Physical Changes	Cervix	Feelings	Actions
Pre-labor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contractions without progress • Cervix ripens • Cervix may efface • Cervix may dilate 1 to 2 cm • Blood or mucus may come out of vagina 	 1 cm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxious • Looking forward to birth and baby 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start or continue nesting • Pack your bags for the hospital
Early Labor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contractions becoming regular • Cervix effaces, dilates 2 to 4 cm 	 3 cm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excited • Impatient • Uncertain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relax at home • Watch a movie • Walk, change positions • Take a shower • Drink fluids and eat lightly • Empty your bladder
Active Labor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contractions are longer, stronger, closer together • Membranes may break • Cervix effaces, dilates 4 to 8 cm 	 4 cm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused • Serious • Starting to get tired 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use patterned breathing • Walk, change positions • Hydrotherapy • Drink fluids and eat lightly • Empty bladder • Epidural anesthesia, if desired

	Physical Changes	Cervix	Feelings	Actions
Transition Labor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contractions intense with multiple peaks • Very little rest • Cervix dilates 8 to 10 cm 	10 cm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused on here and now, tunnel vision • Difficulty stating needs • Sensitive to touch • Possible urge to push • Possible nausea • Grumpy • Shaky 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use patterned breathing • Contractions, but no obvious progress

Stage 2

	Physical Changes	Feelings	Actions
Pushing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be a lull in contractions • Spontaneous urge or directed pushing • Skin between vagina and anus (perineum) may feel burning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ready for birth • Possible renewed energy • Tired, sleepy • Sweaty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use patterned breathing • Ice chips, if desired • Compresses may feel good • Possible bowel movements
Birth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baby's head crowns • Baby is born 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Happy • Relieved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Push baby out • Focus on baby

Stage 3

	Physical Changes	Feelings	Actions
Deliver Placenta	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Placenta is delivered • May have contractions, after-pains • Tear is stitched 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May have shakes • May feel cold, chilled 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on baby

Stage 4

	Physical Changes	Feelings	Actions
Recovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bleeding, lochia • May have contractions, after-pains • Perineum may be sore • Hungry, thirsty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elated, content • May be very tired • Want to talk about the birth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breastfeed baby when comfortable • Eat and drink • Have help the first time you get out of bed • Ice on perineum • Call family, friends • Have visitors

Questions?

Your questions are important. If you have questions about your birth plan, call your healthcare provider during office hours.

If you are in labor, follow your provider's instructions about calling your provider or your Labor & Delivery unit.