Childbirth is a very exciting time. New mothers wonder how long labor will last and how they will cope during vaginal birth. Learning about the different stages of labor can help you know what to expect. While each labor and birth is unique, the process usually follows three stages: First Stage (Early and Active Labor), Second Stage (Transition, Pushing and Birth) and Third Stage (Delivery of the Placenta).

**FIRST STAGE (EARLY AND ACTIVE LABOR)**

**EARLY LABOR**

During early labor, contractions become more regular and the cervix starts to dilate (open) to prepare for childbirth. Contractions can last up to 60 seconds and are 5 to 30 minutes apart. Your cervix dilates to 4 to 6 centimeters during this phase. It is important to be patient and try to rest between contractions as early labor is the longest part of labor and can last 12 to 24 hours or longer for first-time mothers.

**Tips for Dealing with Early Labor:**

- Walking, changing positions, showering or resting/relaxing at home
- Distracting activities (reading or watching TV/movies)
- Calling your support person and/or doula
- Eating light snacks and drinking clear fluids
- Timing your contractions— and when they are becoming stronger and 5 minutes apart for at least 1 hour, follow your physician's instructions

**Arriving to Labor and Delivery in Early Labor**

First-time mothers who are at term, expecting a single baby and with no medical complications should continue to stay at home until it is difficult to breathe or talk through the contractions.

If you arrive at Labor and Delivery in early labor, after evaluation of you and your baby, your physician may recommend that you return when you are further along in labor. This is because the earlier you are admitted the longer it may take you to reach full dilation of 10 centimeters. For example, a woman who is admitted to the hospital at 2 centimeters may take up to 20 hours to reach 10 centimeters, while a woman who is admitted at 5 centimeters may take 13 hours to reach 10 centimeters.

**WHEN TO CALL YOUR DOCTOR**

Not all labor is the same; follow your physician's or midwife’s advice. If you experience any of the following, call your doctor first or come to the hospital immediately:

- Your water breaks/membranes rupture or you experience heavy vaginal bleeding
- You have regular contractions that are less than 5 minutes apart for at least 1 hour
- You are concerned your baby is moving less
The figure and table below gives examples of length/labor time based on how far dilated you are when you are admitted to the hospital.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CERVIX DILATION ON ADMISSION</th>
<th>APPROXIMATE HOURS IN LABOR AND DELIVERY</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 centimeters</td>
<td>20 hours</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 centimeters</td>
<td>17 hours</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 centimeters</td>
<td>16 hours</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 centimeters</td>
<td>13 hours</td>
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</tbody>
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Graph & Table: Zhang, Contemporary Labor Patterns, Obstetrics and Gynecology 2010

**ACTIVE LABOR**

During active labor, contractions are stronger, longer and closer together. Contractions can last up to 60-90 seconds and are approximately 2 to 5 minutes apart. These strong contractions will help your cervix completely dilate to 10 centimeters. Dilation typically happens more rapidly in active labor. For many women giving birth for the first time, active labor can last up to 8 hours, though for others, it can be longer.

**Tips for Dealing with Active Labor:**
- Walking, changing positions, slow or rhythmic breathing during contractions
- Visualizations or aromatherapy
- Massage or counter-pressure from support person
- Epidural analgesia or pain medication are available if you desire
- Bring your support person for coaching and encouragement

**Pain Management During Labor and Childbirth**

Pain during childbirth is unique to each woman’s expectations. This can be due to beliefs about pain in labor, pain tolerance, support in labor and delivery, and previous injury or trauma. There are both medicated and non-medicated pain management options available. Discuss with your doctor the pain management options available to you during labor and childbirth.

**SECOND STAGE (TRANSITION, PUSHING AND BIRTH)**

During transition, your cervix dilates fully to 10 centimeters and you are ready to start pushing. Some mothers feel nauseous during this phase. You may feel pressure and the urge to push. Your physician/midwife will let you know when to start pushing. The second stage is the shortest phase of labor and can last for several minutes to more than 4 hours, especially for first-time mothers.

**THIRD STAGE (AFTER DELIVERY OF THE BABY)**

During the third stage of labor, the placenta (afterbirth) is delivered. You may experience chills or shakiness during this time. It can take up to 30 minutes to deliver the placenta.

For more information, please contact your obstetrician directly and/or visit our website at: cedars-sinai.edu/havingyourbaby