



# Information For You

## Preterm Labour

## What Do I Need to Know?



### What is Preterm Labour?

A normal pregnancy lasts between 37 and 42 weeks.

**Preterm labour** is when labour begins before 37 weeks.

In the UK, 6 to 8 out of every 100 babies are born preterm.



Sometimes the doctor might suggest your baby needs to be born early. This is to keep you and your baby safe.

Often, preterm labour 'just happens' and we don't always know why.

## What might cause Preterm Labour?

Here are some problems which can lead to preterm labour:



- Bleeding in your **uterus**. (**Uterus** - where the baby grows in your body)
- If the uterus is stretched. This might be because there is more than one baby. Or it might be if there is a lot of fluid around the baby.
- An infection.
- Serious physical or mental stress.

## Who is at risk of Preterm Labour?

It is difficult to know who will have a preterm labour.

Only about 1 in 3 of preterm labours happened when a risk is known about.

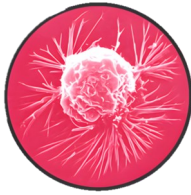
The biggest risk factor is if you have had a preterm labour before.

Other **high risk** factors include:

- Your waters breaking before 34 weeks.
- If you have had a miscarriage after 16 weeks, before this pregnancy.



## Cancer



- If your uterus is an unusual shape.
- If you have had treatment for **cervical cancer** (cancer in the lower part of your uterus).
- If you have had a **cervical stitch** (an operation to try to prevent preterm labour).
- If you have scar tissue inside your uterus.
- If you are pregnant with more than one baby.

Medium risk factors include:



- If you have already had a baby by **caesarean section** (where the baby is born in an operation) but had been in labour before the operation.
- If you have had other treatment to your **cervix** (the lower part of your uterus).



If you have any of these risk factors you will be seen at 16 to 20 weeks. This will be in a preterm birth clinic or a multiple pregnancy clinic if you're having more than one baby.

Other things that can increase your risk of preterm labour are:



- Bleeding after 12 weeks of pregnancy.
- If you use **recreational drugs** (drugs not prescribed by a doctor).
- If you are a smoker.
- If it is less than 12 to 18 months since you had another baby.



## What are the signs of Preterm Labour?



Signs of preterm labour are like full-term labour but less noticeable.

They can include:

- A change in vaginal discharge (thick liquid that comes from your vagina). The change could be how much discharge is coming out, or in the type of discharge. It could be a change in colour or thickness or include blood.
- Any bleeding from your vagina.
- Constant dull pain in your lower back.





- A feeling of pressure 'down below'.
- Mild cramps like period cramps.
- Regular contractions or 'tightenings' even though they may not be painful.
- A rush of fluid or a 'pop' feeling. This could mean your waters have broken.



**Maternity  
Unit**

If you have any of these signs, or are worried, go to your local Maternity Assessment Unit to be checked.

## **What happens at the Maternity Assessment Unit?**

A midwife will see you. They will ask you about what you are feeling or are worried about.

The midwife will also check:

- Your heart rate.
- Your blood pressure.
- Your temperature.
- Your baby.





You will also see an advanced nurse practitioner or a doctor.

The nurse or doctor might also:

- Examine your **abdomen** (your tummy).
- Do a **speculum examination** (a small tool is placed inside your vagina to check your cervix).
- Do an internal scan.
- Take a vaginal swab (wipe inside your vagina and test the wipe).



These checks will give the nurse or doctor a better idea if you are at risk of preterm labour.

They will talk to you about the care you and your baby might need.



If the risk of preterm labour within the next week is **low**:

- The nurse or doctor will think about what else might be happening.
- They might send you home.

If anything changes or gets worse you should go back to the Maternity Assessment Unit.



## How is Preterm Labour treated?

You will go to the hospital. You will stay at the hospital so you and your baby can be looked after.

Some of the things that might happen while you are in hospital:



- You might have a **drip** (a needle in your arm or hand attached to a bag of liquid). The liquid contains medicine.
- You will have blood taken for testing.
- You might be given Nifedipine. This is a drug to slow down or stop preterm labour.

Slowing down preterm labour gives time to:



- Have steroid injections. 2 injections over 24 hours helps reduce some risks to the baby if it comes early.
- Get you to a hospital with a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) - where there is special care for babies that are born preterm.





The doctors will:

- discuss options with you.
- answer any questions you may have.

## What can I do to help prevent Preterm Labour?

The most important things a pregnant woman can do is:



- stop smoking.
- stop using recreational drugs.

If you would like help with this, ask your midwife. They can put you in touch with services that can help.



**If you are concerned about anything in this leaflet, speak to your midwife or doctor.**