

Preparing for Labour

It is considered normal for a pregnancy to last up to 42 weeks. In fact, only 3-5% of all babies are born on their due date. Most women carry their babies for longer than the expected 40 weeks. At this stage in your pregnancy you may feel ready to stop being pregnant and you may find these last days of waiting to meet your baby physically and mentally challenging.

Although it is unlikely that the methods described below will give you an immediate result, any combination may be helpful in preparing your body and mind for labour. They are not meant to be “solutions” for the post term pregnancy, in fact, treating them as such is likely to reduce their effectiveness! The further into your pregnancy you are, the more likely your body will respond. Patience is an important element of allowing your body to do what it needs to do – especially when preparing for labour.

It is important NOT to try these methods of labour until you are term and your midwife has said it is safe to do so.

The following methods may be used for encouraging labour:

Red Raspberry Leaf Tea – the most commonly used herbal tonic for strengthening the uterus. It should be used regularly (at least daily, after 37 weeks) for the best effect. It does not make contractions stronger but enables the uterus to contract more effectively, thereby shortening the length of labour.

Exercise – staying active helps the baby to engage deep into the pelvis where contact between the baby’s head (or the forewaters) and the cervix help to stimulate contractions. Going for walks can also be a good stress reliever. Gentle bouncing and rocking while seated on a birthing (exercise) ball is also a great way to open the pelvis and encourage the baby’s head to descend.

Evening Primrose Oil – is an agent that encourages ripening of the cervix by imitating the function of prostaglandin (hormone) which your body naturally produces to prepare the cervix for labour. The usual dose is 2-3 capsules of 500mg daily. Insert 2 capsules high into the vagina before bed time, and take 1 capsule orally with a meal in the day time. You may want to wear a panty liner as it can be messy when you first get up in the morning.

Homeopathic Remedies – it is best to discuss the use of homeopathic remedies with a homeopath as they can give you specific instructions tailored to your circumstances. Most homeopaths carry a range of natural remedies which have different effects at different stages of labour and pre-labour. Commonly used remedies include caulophyllum, cimifuga, and pulsatilla.

Relaxation – anxiety, fear and frustration play a major role in inhibiting labour. These feelings produce stress hormones in the body that work *against* the hormones which are trying to activate labour. Try to discuss your concerns with your midwife and involve your support person (or people) if possible. Aromatherapy is commonly used for relaxation and has a well-documented, positive effect on getting labour started. It is best to seek advice from an aromatherapist. Commonly used essential oils for getting labour started include clary sage, lavender, jasmine and rose. Relaxation can take many other forms including taking baths, going for walks, watching a movie, going out for dinner, having a massage, etc.

Sex – semen is rich in prostaglandins which help to ripen the cervix. Also, female orgasm produces oxytocin – the hormone needed to start labour! As the vagina has an increased supply of blood vessels during pregnancy, it's not unusual to have a small amount of fresh bleeding after sexual intercourse. This bleeding is from the vagina, not the uterus, and therefore is not dangerous to the baby. It usually settles soon after the event. If you are worried about the amount of bleeding, contact your midwife.

Hand Expressing and Nipple Stimulation – Gentle massaging of the nipples helps to increase oxytocin level in the body. It is essential that you do this in a relaxed manner and environment so that the stress hormones that inhibit labour are not initiated. Using your index and thumb and placing them opposite each other on the bottom and top edge of the areola (the darkened area around your nipple), bring your thumb and finger together by making "V" shape into the tissue behind your nipple. You may see drops of colostrum forming on the edge of the nipple. You can do this for 10-15 minutes on each breast several times a day. Alternatively, you can use an electric pump 10-15 minutes/day to help increase oxytocin levels.

Stretch and Sweep – this is also known as a membrane sweep. It is a procedure your midwife will offer you at 40 weeks into your pregnancy. It involves a vaginal examination in which the midwife will try to put her finger through the opening of the cervix to separate the membrane from the bottom of the uterine wall. This encourages the body to produce prostaglandins which will help soften your cervix. Repeating this procedure several times a week can be a useful method of encouraging the body to go into labour.

Labour requires lots of energy, therefore it is important that you feel physically and mentally strong at the onset. Try to get plenty of rest, plenty of fluids and eat good food so that your energy levels are well stocked before you go into labour.

Castor Oil – encourages uterine contractions as a result of gastric activity. Please discuss the use of castor oil with your midwife *before* you try this option.

Remember....

Don't be discouraged if, after you have tried all of the above and you have not gone into labour. Your body is obviously not quite ready. Stay positive and calm, your baby will soon be here.