

Stages of Labor

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Labor, or the process through which a baby is born, is separated into three primary stages. The first stage begins at the onset of labor and ends when the cervix reaches a 10-centimeter dilation. This first stage is comprised of three sub-stages: early labor, active labor, and transition. The early labor phase begins at the onset of labor and ends when the women's cervix is 3 centimeters dilated. This phase generally takes place over 8-12 hours at which point the cervix begins to open up (i.e., dilate) and thin out. During this phase, contractions, which are the uterine muscles tightening and releasing, begin to occur and take place in intervals. The contractions in this phase are approximately 30-45 seconds with anywhere between a few minutes to half of an hour in between. At this point, the contractions are generally mild and variable, but will become increasingly frequent and intense.

It is important for the woman to try to remain relaxed as the labor stages begin. If feelings of anxiety occur, then attempting some relaxation exercises or participating in distracting tasks (e.g., watching television, reading a book, etc.) may help to reduce those feelings. In addition, hydration and rest are extremely important as the following stages will become increasingly difficult. Attempting to sleep between contractions and drinking plenty of water is essential to preparing the body to continue the grueling process of child birth. At the end of this phase, the amniotic sac will break, releasing fluid out of the women's.

Once the amniotic sac is broken, then the active labor phase begins. It is at this point that the contractions become noticeably different in that they last longer, are more intense, and have less time between the occurrences. The contractions are now lasting about one minute and taking

place every 3-5 minutes. This phase will last approximately 3-5 hours during which time the cervix will continue to dilate to approximately 7 centimeters. During the active labor phase is when the option for pain medication arises.

If a woman opts for the medication, then she is given an epidural. An epidural is a procedure performed by an anesthesiologist or nurse anesthetist where a small, flexible catheter is inserted via a needle into the woman's back just below the terminal end of the spinal cord. This catheter delivers numbing pain medication that blocks the feelings of pain, among other sensations. There are some risks associated with the use of an epidural which include, but are not limited to, prolonging the time required to push in order to deliver the baby, and decreases in mother's blood pressure and baby's heart rate.

The last phase is the transition phase. This phase is considered the most difficult phase and occurs for 30 minutes-2 hours. During this time, the cervix completes the dilation process by expanding from 8 centimeters to 10 centimeters. Contractions in the phase last approximately a minute to a minute and a half and occur every 30 seconds – 2 minutes. These contractions are extremely intense and can overlap with one another. During this phase, it is possible to the women to experience of physical discomforts such as, hot flashes or chills, nausea and/or vomiting, or gas.

Once the cervix reaches its maximum dilation of 10 cm the second stage of labor begins. This stage continues until the baby is born. During this stage, the primary focus is to begin the pushing process to move the baby through the birth canal and ultimately exiting the mother's body. The baby's head is normally the first part to exit the mother's body in what is known as crowning. During crowning, the woman is instructed to stop pushing and may experience a burning sensation. At this time, some women require an episiotomy (i.e., a small vertical cut

made at the opening of the vagina) to allow extra room for the baby to exit. Once the baby is born, the umbilical cord that connected the mother and child is severed and tied off which creates the infant's naval.

After the infant is delivered, the third stage of labor begins. During this stage, the placenta, which was the sac that was surrounding the baby, detaches from the uterine wall and is delivered. The contractions associated with this stage begin approximately 5 to 10 minutes after the birth of the baby and end once the placenta is no longer inside the mother. At this point, all stages of labor have been completed and the mother and child will continue to be monitored for any possible complications caused by the birthing process.

See Also:

Further Reading

American Pregnancy Association. *Epidural Anesthesia*. Retrieved from

<http://americanpregnancy.org/labor-and-birth/epidural/>

American Pregnancy Association. *Stages of Childbirth: Stage I*. Retrieved from

<http://americanpregnancy.org/labor-and-birth/first-stage-of-labor/>

American Pregnancy Association. *Stages of Childbirth: Stage II*. Retrieved from

<http://americanpregnancy.org/labor-and-birth/second-stage/>

American Pregnancy Association. *Stages of Childbirth: Stage III*. Retrieved from

<http://americanpregnancy.org/labor-and-birth/third-stage/>

Thorp, J. A. & Breedlove, G. (1996). Epidural analgesia in labor: an evaluation of risks and benefits. *Birth*. 23(2), 63–83.