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Childbirth

What is childbirth?

Childbirth is the process of giving birth to a baby. It includes labor and delivery of the fetus and the placenta. The placenta is the organ that supplies food and oxygen through the umbilical cord to your fetus during pregnancy
[<https://medlineplus.gov/fetalhealthanddevelopment.html>] .

A full-term pregnancy is 40 weeks. Labor usually begins between 37 and 42 weeks of pregnancy
[<https://medlineplus.gov/pregnancy.html>] . It is how your body prepares to give birth to your baby. Preterm labor [<https://medlineplus.gov/pretermlabor.html>] can start before 37 completed weeks of pregnancy. It can lead to premature birth. Premature babies [<https://medlineplus.gov/prematurebabies.html>] may face serious health risks.

How do I know if I'm going into labor?

Signs that you might be going into labor include:

- Regular contractions start to come closer together
- Leaking fluid or bleeding from the vagina
- Low, dull backache
- Abdominal (belly) cramps

The signs of labor, when labor starts, and the time it takes to deliver your baby can vary with each pregnancy. Call your health care provider if you have any signs of labor, even if it is before your due date.

What are the stages of labor?

Labor happens in three stages.

- **The first stage** begins with contractions. This stage could last for hours or days. It continues until your cervix has become thinner and dilated (stretched) to about 4 inches wide to allow your baby to pass through.
- **The second stage** is when you begin to push downward. Crowning is when your baby's scalp comes into view. Shortly afterward, your baby is born.
- **The third stage** is when you deliver the placenta, and your provider cuts the umbilical cord.

Sometimes, mothers need to have labor induced. Medicines or other methods are used to start labor. This is usually only done when the due date has passed or if a problem with the pregnancy risks the health of the mother or the fetus.

Mothers and their babies are closely monitored during labor and delivery. Delivery can occur either vaginally through the birth canal, or if there are complications [<https://medlineplus.gov/childbirthproblems.html>] , the delivery may be done surgically by a Cesarean section [<https://medlineplus.gov/cesareandelivery.html>] . This is when the baby is taken out through your abdomen (belly) and uterus.

What are the options for pain relief during childbirth?

The amount of pain during childbirth can vary based on the size and position of the baby, your level of comfort with the process, and the strength of your contractions.

Options for pain relief during labor and delivery may include:

- **Medicines** may reduce the pain, but they don't stop it completely.
- **Natural methods** ease pain without taking medicines. A few examples include using relaxation techniques, a birthing ball, massage, or taking a bath or shower.
- **Combination of medicines and natural methods.**

Discuss your options, risks, and benefits of pain relief during labor and delivery with your provider before your due date.

NIH: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development

Start Here

- Labor and Birth [<https://womenshealth.gov/pregnancy/childbirth-and-beyond/labor-and-birth>] (Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health)
Also in Spanish [<https://espanol.womenshealth.gov/pregnancy/childbirth-and-beyond/labor-and-birth>]
- Stages of Labor [<https://www.marchofdimes.org/find-support/topics/birth/stages-labor>]  (March of Dimes Foundation)
Also in Spanish [<https://nacersano.marchofdimes.org/parto-y-nacimiento/etapas-del-parto.aspx>]
- What Is Labor? [<https://www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/pregnancy/conditioninfo/labor>]  (Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development)
Also in Spanish [<https://espanol.nichd.nih.gov/salud/temas/pregnancy/informacion/trabajo>]

Diagnosis and Tests

- Contractions and Signs of Labor [<https://www.marchofdimes.org/find-support/topics/birth/contractions-and-signs-labor>] (March of Dimes Foundation)
- Cord Blood Testing and Banking [<https://medlineplus.gov/lab-tests/cord-blood-testing-and-banking/>]  (National Library of Medicine)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/pruebas-de-laboratorio/pruebas-y-bancos-de-sangre-del-cordon-umbilical/>]
- Monitoring Baby's Heart Rate during Labor [<https://familydoctor.org/monitoring-babys-heart-rate-labor/?adfree=true>] (American Academy of Family Physicians)
Also in Spanish [<https://es.familydoctor.org/monitoreo-de-la-frecuencia-cardiaca-del-bebe-durante-el-parto/?adfree=true>]
- Water Breaking: Understand This Sign of Labor [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/labor-and-delivery/in-depth/water-breaking/art-20044142?p=1>] (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/es/healthy-lifestyle/labor-and-delivery/in-depth/water-breaking/art-20044142?p=1>]

Treatments and Therapies

- Dealing with Pain during Childbirth [<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/childbirth-pain.html>] (Nemours Foundation)
Also in Spanish [<https://kidshealth.org/es/parents/childbirth-pain.html>]

Related Issues

- Apgar Scores [<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/prenatal/delivery-beyond/pages/Apgar-Scores.aspx>] (American Academy of Pediatrics)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.healthychildren.org/Spanish/ages-stages/prenatal/delivery-beyond/Paginas/apgar-scores.aspx>]
- Birthing Classes [<https://familydoctor.org/birthing-classes/?adfree=true>] (American Academy of Family Physicians)
Also in Spanish [<https://es.familydoctor.org/clases-de-parto/?adfree=true>]
- Where Should I Have My Baby? [<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/birth-centers-hospitals.html>] (Nemours Foundation)
Also in Spanish [<https://kidshealth.org/es/parents/birth-centers-hospitals.html>]

Specifics

- Assisted Vaginal Delivery [<https://www.acog.org/womens-health/faqs/assisted%20vaginal%20delivery>] (American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists)
- Cesarean Section: MedlinePlus Health Topic [<https://medlineplus.gov/cesareansection.html>]  (National Library of Medicine)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/cesareansection.html>]
- Epidurals [<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/epidurals.html>] (Nemours Foundation)
- Episiotomy: When It's Needed, When It's Not [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/labor-and-delivery/in-depth/episiotomy/art-20047282?p=1>] (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/es/healthy-lifestyle/labor-and-delivery/in-depth/episiotomy/art-20047282?p=1>]
- Induction of Labor at 39 Weeks [<https://www.acog.org/womens-health/faqs/induction-of-labor-at-39-weeks>] (American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists)
- Labor Pain [<https://madeforthismoment.asahq.org/pain-management/types-of-pain/labor/>]
(American Society of Anesthesiologists)
- Natural Childbirth [<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/natural-childbirth.html>] (Nemours Foundation)
Also in Spanish [<https://kidshealth.org/es/parents/natural-childbirth.html>]
- What if My Baby Isn't Born by My Due Date? [<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/due-date.html>] (Nemours Foundation)
Also in Spanish [<https://kidshealth.org/es/parents/due-date.html>]
- Why at Least 39 Weeks Is Best for Your Baby [<https://www.marchofdimes.org/find-support/topics/birth/why-least-39-weeks-best-your-baby>]  (March of Dimes Foundation)

Images

- Epidural - series [https://medlineplus.gov/ency/presentations/100195_1.htm] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/esp_presentations/100195_1.htm]
- Episiotomy - series [https://medlineplus.gov/ency/presentations/100017_1.htm] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/esp_presentations/100017_1.htm]
- Vaginal birth - series [https://medlineplus.gov/ency/presentations/100198_1.htm] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/esp_presentations/100198_1.htm]

Statistics and Research

- FastStats: Births - Method of Delivery [<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/delivery.htm>] (National Center for Health Statistics)
- PeriStats (Perinatal Statistics) [<https://www.marchofdimes.org/peristats/>] (March of Dimes Foundation)

Clinical Trials

- ClinicalTrials.gov: Delivery, Obstetric [<https://clinicaltrials.gov/search?cond=%22Delivery,+Obstetric%22&aggFilters=status:not%20rec>]  (National Institutes of Health)
- ClinicalTrials.gov: Labor, Obstetric [<https://clinicaltrials.gov/search?cond=%22Labor,+Obstetric%22&aggFilters=status:not%20rec>]  (National Institutes of Health)

Journal Articles

References and abstracts from MEDLINE/PubMed (National Library of Medicine)

- Article: Establishing the effect of COVID-19 lockdown policy on the utilization of... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40751199>]
- Article: Algorithm for timing of delivery in placenta accreta spectrum: role of... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40750874>]

- Article: Effectiveness of person-centered intervention on obstetric violence during facility-based childbirth among... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40746675>]
- Childbirth -- see more articles [<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=%22Labor%2C+Obstetric%22%5Bmajr%3Anoexp%5D+AND+female+%5Bmh%5D+OR+%22Delivery%2C+Obstetric%22%5Bmajr%3Anoexp%5D+AND+female+%5Bmh%5D+AND+humans%5Bmh%5D+AND+english%5Bla%5D+AND+%22last+1+Year%22+%5Bdat%5D+NOT+%28letter%5Bpt%5D+OR+case+reports%5Bpt%5D+OR+editorial%5Bpt%5D+OR+comment%5Bpt%5D%29+AND+free+full+text%5Bsb%5D+>]

Find an Expert

- Accredited Birth Centers [<https://birthcenteraccreditation.org/find-accredited-birth-centers/>] (Commission for the Accreditation of Birth Centers)
- American College of Nurse-Midwives [<https://midwife.org/>]
- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists [<https://www.acog.org/>]
- Birthing-Friendly Hospitals and Health Systems [<https://data.cms.gov/provider-data/birthing-friendly-hospitals-and-health-systems>] (Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services)
- Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health [<https://womenshealth.gov/>] Also in Spanish [<https://espanol.womenshealth.gov/>]
- How to Find Find an Ob-Gyn [<https://www.acog.org/womens-health/find-an-ob-gyn>] (American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists)

Patient Handouts

- Am I in labor? [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000508.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia) Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000508.htm>]
- Assisted delivery with forceps [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000509.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia) Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000509.htm>]
- Delivery presentations [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000621.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia) Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000621.htm>]
- Epidural block - pregnancy [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000484.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia) Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000484.htm>]
- Episiotomy [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000482.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia) Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000482.htm>]
- Questions to ask your doctor about hospital care after delivery [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000970.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia) Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000970.htm>]
- Questions to ask your doctor about labor and delivery [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000960.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia) Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000960.htm>]
- Spinal and epidural anesthesia [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/007413.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia) Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/article/007413.htm>]
- What to bring to your labor and delivery [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000543.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia) Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000543.htm>]
- Your baby in the birth canal [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/002060.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia) Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/article/002060.htm>]



MEDICAL ENCYCLOPEDIA

Am I in labor? [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000508.htm>]

Assisted delivery with forceps [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000509.htm>]

Choosing the right health care provider for pregnancy and childbirth
[<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000596.htm>]

Delivery presentations [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000621.htm>]

Epidural - series [https://medlineplus.gov/ency/presentations/100195_1.htm]

Epidural block - pregnancy [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000484.htm>]

Episiotomy [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000482.htm>]

Episiotomy - aftercare [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000483.htm>]

Episiotomy - series [https://medlineplus.gov/ency/presentations/100017_1.htm]

Fetal scalp pH testing [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003408.htm>]

Inducing labor [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000625.htm>]

Managing pain during labor [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000587.htm>]

Premature rupture of membranes [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000512.htm>]

Questions to ask your doctor about hospital care after delivery
[<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000970.htm>]

Questions to ask your doctor about labor and delivery [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000960.htm>]

Spinal and epidural anesthesia [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/007413.htm>]

Strategies for getting through labor [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000612.htm>]

Tips for labor coaches [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000545.htm>]

Vacuum-assisted delivery [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000514.htm>]

Vaginal birth - series [https://medlineplus.gov/ency/presentations/100198_1.htm]

Vaginal birth after C-section [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000589.htm>]

What to bring to your labor and delivery [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000543.htm>]

What to include in your birth plan [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000567.htm>]

Your baby in the birth canal [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/002060.htm>]

Related Health Topics

Cesarean Delivery [<https://medlineplus.gov/cesareandelivery.html>]

Childbirth Problems [<https://medlineplus.gov/childbirthproblems.html>]

Health Problems in Pregnancy [<https://medlineplus.gov/healthproblemsinpregnancy.html>]

Postpartum Care [<https://medlineplus.gov/postpartumcare.html>]

Preterm Labor [<https://medlineplus.gov/pretermlabor.html>]

Twins, Triplets, Multiple Births [<https://medlineplus.gov/twinstripletsmultiplebirths.html>]

Other Languages

Find health information in languages other than English [<https://medlineplus.gov/languages/childbirth.html>] on *Childbirth*

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