Braxton Hicks or Preterm Labor?

by Tracy Hoogenboom

Do you think you might be having contractions before your due date and are wondering what you should do? These may be harmless and ineffective contractions, but they may also be a sign of preterm labor. So how do you tell the difference?

Preterm labor is most often felt as a vague, painless tightening of the abdomen, and may or may not be accompanied by one or more signs and symptoms of preterm labor. Preterm labor contractions usually occur in a regular pattern and may cause changes to occur in the cervix.

All pregnant women should self-monitor to see if they are having regular contractions. This process is called "self-palpation". It is important to self-palpate to determine whether or not your contractions are occurring in a regular pattern and to count how many you are having each hour.

Your doctor may recommend self-palpation twice a day to keep track of contractions that may lead to preterm labor. Self-palpation is also a good way to monitor yourself and become familiar with your normal pattern of uterine activity. Ideally, follow these steps once a day or anytime you have signs of preterm labor. If you are in preterm labor, your doctor may prescribe bed rest, drugs to halt the labor (called tocolytics), and/or a device called a home uterine activity monitor. This device allows you to monitor contractions at home without being hospitalized.

"It's Just Braxton Hicks."

Braxton Hicks contractions occur in most normal pregnancies, and are felt as painless and infrequent tightening of the uterus. These contractions usually don't occur more than once per hour and do not make any changes to the cervix.

Never heed the advice of a well-meaning friend who tells you, "Don't worry...those are just Braxton Hicks!" Many healthcare professionals consider the term Braxton Hicks outdated, overused, and even dangerous. Always report painless tightening to your doctor.
The vast majority of contractions occur in the evening hours, so that is the recommended time to monitor. Drink 1-2 cups of water or other fluids. Go to the bathroom and empty your bladder. Have a note pad nearby to take notes, as well as phone, clock, and other items you may need during the hour. Minimize distractions. Have young children watch a video or go for a walk with a neighbor. Turn off the TV.

Lie comfortably on your left side, using pillows for support. Using your fingertips, gently feel the top of the uterus. When the uterus is relaxed it will feel soft; a contraction will cause the uterus to become firm and hard and will effect the entire muscle, top to bottom. You are monitoring to detect those contractions that cause the entire uterine area to become firm.

If you feel a contraction, check the clock and count how long it takes for the uterus to become soft again. Write it down. Write down the time between contractions. Write down any other symptoms that you have been having, as well as your level of activity, medications, and any other information that may help your doctor.

**When to Call Your Doctor**

If you have more than three contractions per hour, or there is less than 15 minutes between any contraction, you may be in preterm labor and need to call your healthcare provider. Always call if you are confused or concerned about what you are feeling. Watch for signs of preterm labor and do everything you can to prevent a premature delivery.