

# Labor Induction

## What is labor?

Labor is the process that leads to the birth of a baby. Labor usually starts on its own between 37 weeks and 42 weeks of pregnancy.

There are three stages of labor. The first stage of labor is the longest—active labor. The second stage is the pushing phase—the birth of the baby. The third stage is the shortest—delivery of the **placenta**.

## What is labor induction?

Labor induction is the use of medications or other methods to bring on (induce) labor.

## Why is labor induced?

Labor is induced for many reasons. Some of the methods used to induce labor also can speed up labor if it is going too slowly. Labor may be induced if the health of the woman or the baby is at risk. Whether your labor will be induced depends on the condition of you and your baby, how far along the pregnancy is, the status of your **cervix**, and other factors.

## When is labor induced?

Unless a problem occurs, labor induction is not done before 39 weeks of pregnancy.

## What is ripening and dilating of the cervix?

During labor, a pregnant woman's cervix thins and opens to prepare for the vaginal birth of her baby. If your cervix is not ready for labor (ripe), certain medications or devices may be used to make it soft and able to stretch for labor. Special dilators can be inserted into the cervix to widen it. **Prostaglandins** are drugs that can be used to prepare the cervix for labor. They are synthetic forms of chemicals produced naturally by the body. These drugs can be inserted into the **vagina** or taken by mouth.

## What is stripping of the membranes and what does it do?

To strip the membranes, your health care provider checks your cervix with a gloved finger. Next, he or she sweeps the finger over the thin membranes that connect the **amniotic sac** to the wall of your **uterus**. You may feel some intense cramping and have spotting when this is done. Stripping the membranes is done in term pregnancies. It causes your body to release prostaglandins, which soften the cervix and may cause contractions.

## How can rupturing the amniotic sac induce labor?

If it has not broken already, breaking your water can get contractions started. Your health care provider may make a small opening in the amniotic sac. This procedure may cause some discomfort.

Rupturing the amniotic sac is done in term pregnancies after the baby's head has moved down in the pelvis. Most women go into labor within hours of their water breaking. Another method of labor induction may be added if labor does not occur.

### What medication is used to induce labor?

Oxytocin is a medication used to induce labor. It is a man-made hormone that causes contractions. When oxytocin is used to induce labor or make contractions stronger, it flows into your bloodstream through an intravenous (IV) tube in your arm. A pump hooked up to the IV tube controls the amount you are given. Other drugs also are used to induce labor in specific situations.

### What are the risks of labor induction?

Although problems seldom occur with labor induction, there can be some complications:

- Change in fetal heart rate
- Increased risk of infection in the woman and baby
- Umbilical cord problems
- Overstimulation of the uterus
- Uterine rupture

To help prevent these problems, the fetal heart rate and force of contractions may be monitored with some types of induction. To avoid increasing the risk of uterine rupture, induction with certain medications is not used in women who have had a previous **cesarean delivery** or a scar from any other type of surgery on the uterus.

### Glossary

**Amniotic Sac:** Fluid-filled sac in the mother's uterus in which the fetus develops.

**Cervix:** The lower, narrow end of the uterus at the top of the vagina.

**Cesarean Delivery:** Delivery of a baby through an incision made in the mother's abdomen and uterus.

**Placenta:** Tissue that provides nourishment to and takes waste away from the fetus.

**Prostaglandins:** Chemicals that are made by the body that have many effects, including causing the muscle of the uterus to contract, usually causing cramps.

**Uterus:** A muscular organ located in the female pelvis that contains and nourishes the developing fetus during pregnancy.

**Vagina:** A passageway surrounded by muscles leading from the uterus to the outside of the body, also known as the birth canal.