

The Birth Process

Getting Ready

Towards the end of your pregnancy, you may start to feel practice contractions (sometimes called 'Braxton-Hicks'). This is a normal part of pregnancy that lets you know that your body is preparing to birth your baby.



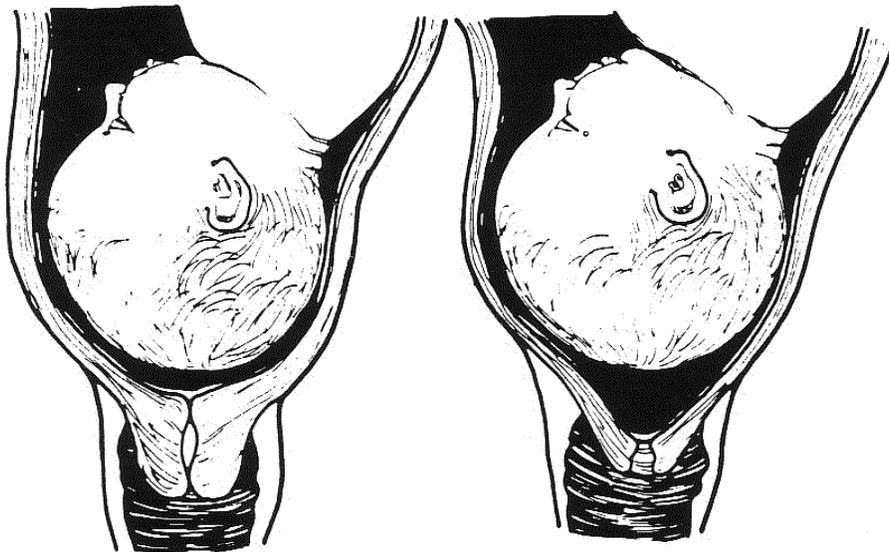
A pregnant woman at 40 weeks gestation.
In this image, the baby has dropped. One your baby has dropped (or engaged) you will notice that it is easier to breathe, but that you also have more pressure on your bladder.

It's important to remember that many changes must happen in your body before your cervix is ready to start dilating. Your cervix must move from a posterior (back-facing) to an anterior (forward-facing) position, it must soften, and it must start to thin out (efface) before it will be ready to open. For some women, all of this happens without them noticing, or with the help of practice contractions, but for others, it will happen in the pre-labour phase with the help of your early labour contractions. Both ways are completely normal.

Opening (The First Stage)

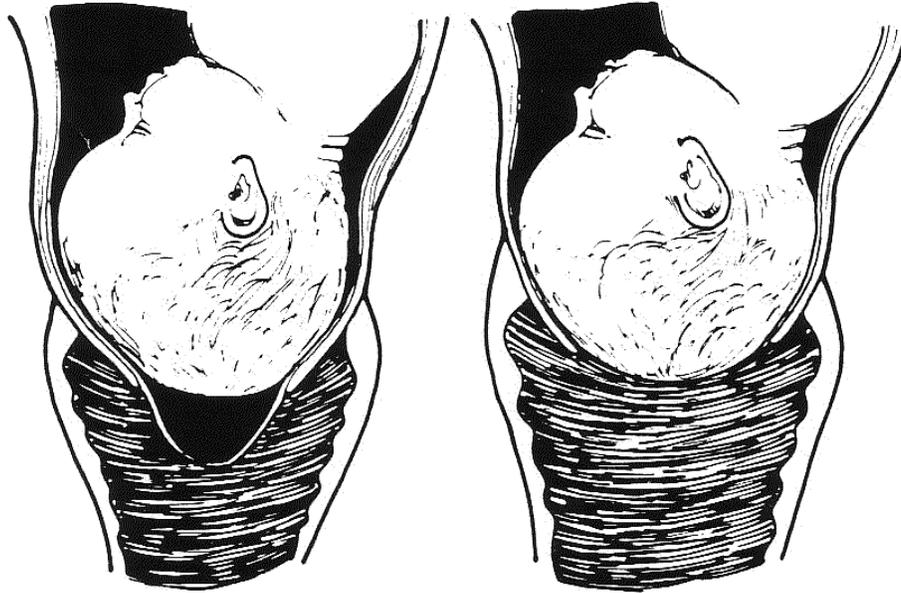
The opening of your cervix happens with the help of your powerful uterine muscles. The contractions of these muscles produce the birthing sensations you feel during labour.

Dilation is measured in centimeters from 0 to 10 cm. Early on in the opening process, you might feel excited. As labour gets more serious, so will you. The transition stage of dilation is from about 8-10 cm. It's normal to feel self-doubt and confusion at this stage. Though it is the hardest part, it's also the shortest. Labour always has its own clock, so it is difficult to predict how long this stage will last, but for first babies, the average is about 12-18 hours. For later babies, the average is about 8-12 hours.



No effacement yet; this cervix is still long and thick.

This woman's cervix has started to efface. Notice how her cervix appears much 'shorter.'

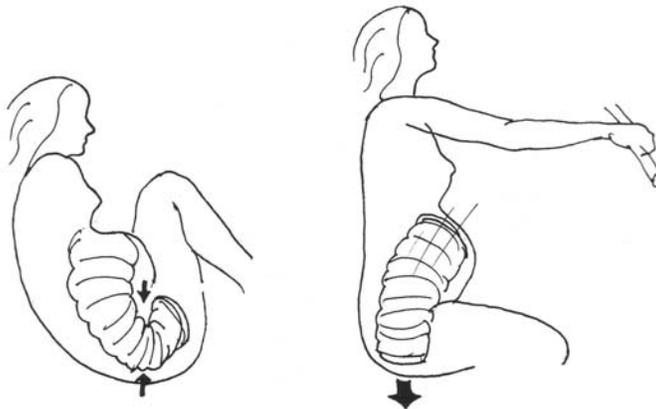


The bag of waters helps to open her cervix, gently and evenly.

Almost at full dilation; soon it will be time to start pushing!

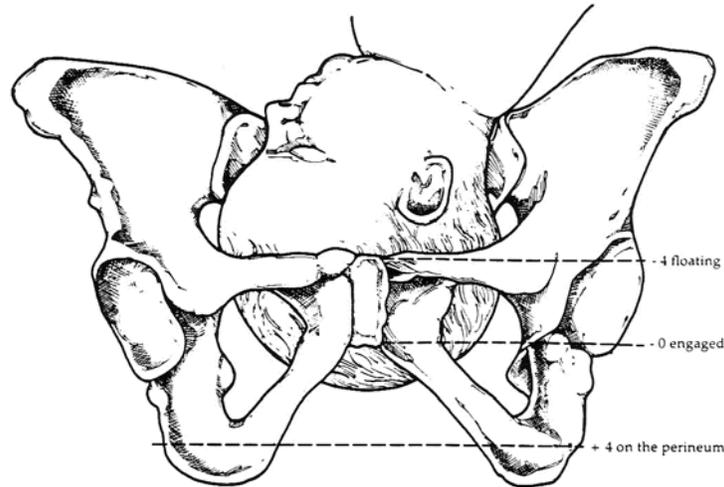
Pushing (The Second Stage)

Once you are fully dilated, it's normal to be in a hurry to start pushing, but it's best to wait until the urge to push is overwhelming. Try and rest if you can, and choose the position that suits you best. There are many great positions for pushing, like squatting for example, which opens your pelvis up by about 28% more than in a reclining position.



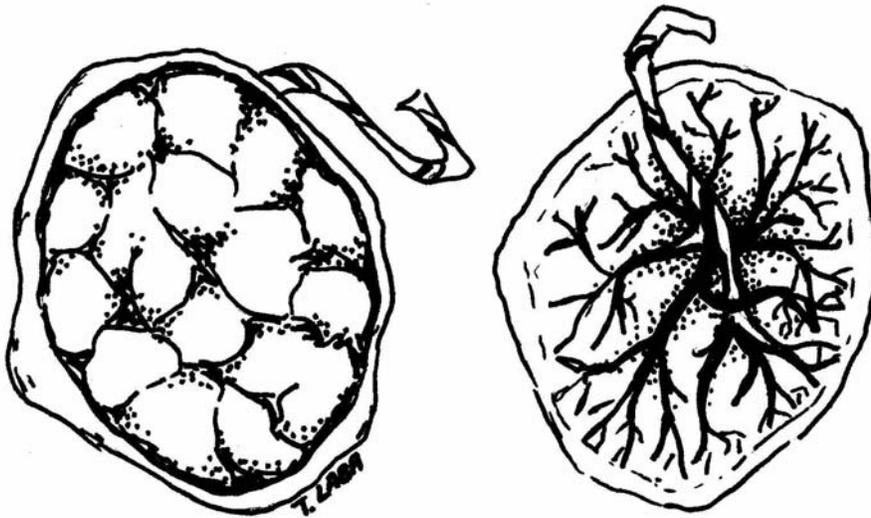
Note the difference between a semi-sitting position and an upright position.

Once you are ready to push, let your body be your guide. The slow rocking of your baby through the birth canal gives your tissues lots of time to stretch out nicely. A time will come when you know you could give a mighty push and the baby would be born, but the slower you go, the less likely you are to tear. The pushing stage can take anywhere from 20 minutes to 2 or 3 hours, but it is usually shorter if you've had a baby before.



The baby's descent through the birth canal is measured in station; from -4 (floating) to +4 (on the perineum).

Birthing the Placenta (The Third Stage)



Maternal Side

Fetal Side

Once the baby is born, you will have a bit of a break, and then it will be time to push out the placenta. This will feel pretty easy after all the work of pushing out your baby, but you will have to give some good pushes. The birth isn't over until you push out your placenta!