

What Happens During the Last Weeks of Pregnancy?

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The physical and emotional processes of labor and birth begin long before birth. During the first months of pregnancy, your fetus (baby) grows and develops, and your body changes to accommodate all your growing fetus's needs. During the last month or two, hormonally-driven shifts, initiated in your baby, prepare both you and baby for the upcoming birth. See the figure, "Events of Late Pregnancy." Your body, placenta and baby all work in harmony. Each part effects changes in the others. Birth takes place when your baby is ready to thrive outside your body; when your placenta is no longer sustaining your pregnancy, but now, is preparing you and your baby for the physical demands of birth; when your uterus is ready to expel your baby; and when you are ready to nurture and nourish your baby. Inducing labor with no medical reason can interrupt this harmony and can cause minor or major problems for the baby after birth.

There is strong evidence that **your unborn baby (fetus)** is the one who actually starts the chain of events leading to labor and birth. Some important changes take place in your late pregnancy (such as lung and brain development; ability to control body temperature; development of all the senses; increases in weight, muscle strength, and coordination; and many more). These changes prepare your baby for life outside your body -- to breathe, cuddle, take in food, keep warm, and to communicate such feelings as contentment, focused interest, comfort, discomfort, hunger, sleepiness, and others.

If babies are born prematurely, they may miss some of these developmental steps that are usually completed in the uterus. They will need extra medical care and more time in the hospital to mature and become able to thrive at home. The closer the birth is to term, the better for your baby.

As the mother, your brain, breasts, uterus, joints, muscles, hormones, even your emo-

tions, prepare you to give birth and provide for your baby's needs once born.

As you get closer to birth, you may begin having aches in your back and legs and other discomforts. These are due to increased flexibility of your joints (to allow your baby through your pelvis). Your uterus begins contracting off and on. Contractions are usually not painful or frequent, and don't cause your cervix to open (though they are helping your cervix soften and thin out. (If these contractions are as frequent as 4 to 6 an hour for 2 hours, it is wise to report this to your doctor or midwife, because, though unlikely, this may be a sign of premature labor).

You may wake up several times in the night, sometimes with aching joints, a need to urinate, a wiggling baby, or some other reason. Your body is tuning up for after the birth when you will wake up frequently to feed your baby. Your breasts also produce colostrum (your baby's ideal first food).

Your **placenta and the membranes** that make up the bag of waters also play a huge role in fetal development and in the birth. They begin signaling that they cannot continue to sustain the pregnancy, and hormones produced by your baby start a chain of events in the placenta and uterus that makes the uterine muscle more sensitive to the hormone, oxytocin. A whole "cocktail" of hormones and prostaglandins is released. These coordinate your contractions, the thinning and opening of your cervix, finally escalating to the birth of your baby and your placenta!

The timing of labor is usually perfect. Your cervix becomes ripe and thin, your contractions continue, becoming longer, stronger and closer together and over time your cervix dilates, your uterus presses on the baby while you push, and the baby and placenta are born.

CONGRATULATIONS!