

# CHILDBIRTH PROGRAM – PRE-TERM LABOUR

## GRAND RIVER HOSPITAL – K-W HEALTH CENTRE

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### **Preterm Labour**

#### ○ *What is preterm labour?*

A normal or term pregnancy lasts 37 to 42 weeks. Labour is a process that happens at the end of the pregnancy. In labour, there are contractions (tightenings) of the uterus (womb), which cause the cervix (opening to the womb) to open. Preterm (premature) labour is labour that starts before 37 weeks of pregnancy.

#### ○ *What does this mean for my baby?*

Preterm labour may lead to a preterm birth or, your baby being born too soon. Preterm babies may have trouble breathing, feeding, and keeping warm, they may be more likely to get infections and may need special care in the hospital. Some preterm babies stay in the hospital for further assessment and care after their mother is discharged. The earlier your baby is born, the more likely he or she is to have long term health problems such as blindness, difficulty walking and problems learning. Some preterm babies are very small and may not be strong enough to live.

#### ○ *Could this happen to me?*

Preterm labour can happen to anyone. Even if you are healthy and do "all the right things" there is still a chance that preterm labour can happen to you. Medical experts do not know all the reasons why labour starts too early. Some women may be more likely than others to have a preterm birth. For example women who:

- Are having their first baby
- Have had a preterm baby before
- Are carrying more than one baby, for example twins
- Have a vaginal or bladder infection
- Have had several miscarriages after 12 weeks of pregnancy
- Are smokers
- Are underweight
- Have a lot of stress in their life
- Are not getting enough healthy food

#### ○ *What can I do to reduce the chances of preterm labour?*

Although it is not possible to prevent all preterm labours from happening, there is still much you can do to help your baby to be born at the right time:

- See your doctor/midwife as early as possible in pregnancy
- Join prenatal classes early in your pregnancy
- If you smoke, try to quit or at least cut down
- Take time to lie down or put your feet up during the day
- Follow *Canada's Food Guide for Healthy Eating*
- Listen to your body - notice when things feel "different" and talk to your doctor/midwife about it
- Talk to your doctor/midwife about how to deal with the stress in your life

#### ○ *How do I know if I am having preterm labour?*

It is not always easy for a woman to tell if she is experiencing preterm labour. Many signs feel the same as expected occurrences in the second half of pregnancy. The signs to watch for especially if they are new or different from before are:

- Bad cramps or stomach pains that don't go away

- Bleeding, trickle, or gush of fluid from your vagina
- Lower back pain/pressure, or a change in lower backache
- A feeling that the baby is pushing down
- Fever, chills, dizziness, vomiting, or a bad headache
- Blurry vision or spots before your eyes
- Sudden or severe swelling of your feet, hands, or face
- Contractions, or change in the strength or number of them
- A significant change in your baby's movements
- A sudden increase in the amount of vaginal discharge
- Some women may just feel that "something is not right"

○ *A word about contractions*

Preterm labour contractions feel different from the normal tightenings that many women feel in the second half of pregnancy:

- they may feel more regular
- they do not go away if you move around or lie down
- there may be other signs that happen with the contractions, such as fluid leaking from the vagina or pelvic pressure

○ *What should I do if I think I am in preterm labour?*

If you have any of the signs of preterm labour, **GO TO THE HOSPITAL!** If you cannot drive yourself ask a neighbour or friend to help. If you cannot get to the hospital right away, call the childbirth unit for advice.

○ *What happens if I am in preterm labour?*

When you arrive at the birthing unit in the hospital, the doctor/midwife will check to see if you are in labour. If there are no changes or only very small changes in the cervix, you will probably get to go home and rest. Your own doctor/midwife will want to see you soon.

If your cervix has started to open or shorten and the doctor/midwife thinks that you might give birth soon, you will be admitted to the hospital for treatment. You may have to be transferred to a hospital that provides special care for preterm babies. If you are less than 34 weeks pregnant you will probably receive two doses of a medication called Celestone to help your baby's lungs to mature. This medication works best if it is in your body for 48 hours, so you may also receive another medication to delay or stop the labour for this amount of time. After this second medication, your body may delay labour on its own for a few weeks. It is also possible that the labour will only be delayed for a short time and that your baby will be born early.

*Remember...*

Preterm labour can happen to anyone, there are things you can do to help your baby to be born at the right time

- Know the signs of preterm labour
- Go to hospital if you think you are experiencing preterm labour