

What is giving birth really like?

This is the million dollar question for most pregnant women. It's great to challenge all your existing expectations of labour and birth, but, once you've done that, you need something concrete to replace them with. Of course, giving birth is as many and varied as there are women who do it. If we asked, "What is making love really like?", or "What is eating really like?", we wouldn't expect there to be one clear-cut, standard answer. Nevertheless, there is some common ground that most women share, so what follows outlines the process of a straightforward labour...

Labour in phases

There's a rather annoying tendency to break labour down into neat and tidy stages, and this comes from hospital birth, where mathematical concepts like 'Friedman's curve', which measures a woman's hourly rate of dilation, have been used for the past few decades, both to assess the progress of labour, and to dictate when there is not perceived to be enough progress, and intervention is necessary. In reality, most women's bodies don't often conform to graphs, charts and statistical norms – a labour may start slow, get fast, stall, do a bit more slow stuff, then get cracking again, or it might be slow all the way until the end, or it might be like riding the runaway horse in the Derby.

You might hear in antenatal class about the Three Stages of Labour. This means the first phase of your uterus contracting and your cervix dilating, the second phase, of being fully dilated and pushing your baby out, and the third phase, often a bit of an afterthought, of delivering the placenta.

Knowing about these three stages is useful, but it still doesn't answer the question of how it all really feels. So let's look more closely at what labour is like. I've divided it into not three phases, but fourteen, but in reality, all of these phases will blend and blur into each other and trying to conceptualize one of the most mind-blowingly unique experiences of your life in this mathematical way is a bit like trying to divide up your wedding day in terms of car journeys, or measure out your life in coffee spoons.

It will be different for you. But it will also be something like this...

1. The Nothing Doing Phase

In the days and hours before labour begins, you might feel the increasing intensity of the 'Nothing Doing' phase. You will be desperately searching for signs that something is happening, and, in particular if you are nearing your due date, you'll be being bombarded by well-meaning friends asking, 'Anything doing?'

You might feel like the answer is, 'Nope, nothing to see here', but in fact, the dance of hormones is almost certainly beginning, and there may be internal changes that you cannot see or feel, like your baby moving further into position or your cervix beginning to thin.

What does it feel like?

Boring, frustrating, exciting, heavy, cumbersome, and filled with anticipation. Some women feel physically really uncomfortable, others are energized and agile. Many start to feel small urges to withdraw from day to day life.

2. The Maybe Something is Happening Phase

This can sometimes be your mind playing tricks on you due to your desperation to both meet your baby and be able to put on your own shoes again, but more often than not, it's the beginning of little signs that birth is more and more imminent. You might experience an increase in so-called 'Braxton Hicks', those tightenings in your bump that are like practice contractions. You might feel 'hormonal', perhaps with rushes of oxytocin which can make you feel very positive and loved up, or adrenaline, which can make you decide that now would be a great time to launder your curtains by hand. You might also lose your mucus plug, which is the little blob of jelly that seals up your uterus. This will sometimes have a pinkish tinge and is also known rather romantically as a Bloody Show.

What does it feel like?

Spiralling inwards more, feeling connected to your baby, nervous, excited, emotional, with some tightenings in your bump.

3. The Nigging Phase

Midwives love this word: nigging. They use it to describe women in the very early part of labour, who are starting to feel those Braxton Hicks more strongly. We could also call this the **Yes, Something IS Finally Flipping Happening Phase**. It really feels like everything could be getting going at last. Some women's waters break but often this doesn't happen until much later in labour. But the tightenings in your bump will start to be harder to ignore, and you might think about timing the distance between them, either with an app or a good old-fashioned clock. If you are planning to give birth in a hospital or MLU, then you will normally be advised to wait until your tightenings or contractions are 30 to 60 seconds long and about 5 minutes apart before heading in. But don't be disappointed if this doesn't happen for a while – often the Nigging Phase can be very 'stop start'. Sleeping and eating are both great ideas in this phase, as you gather your energy for what is ahead.

What does it feel like?

Exciting, focusing, lower back pain, period pain, can still be very stop start.

4. The Ramping Up Phase

Slowly but surely, the nigging phase gives way to something that feels a bit different, as labour gathers pace and 'ramps up'. You might find that the tightenings, surges or contractions demand your full attention, and that you begin to get into a rhythm or dance with them. For example, each time you feel one approach you might lean on the chest of drawers, rock back and

forward, moan, and work your way through it, until you feel it subside again. Then you might carry on with what you were doing. Remember, between surges you will feel completely normal and often by this stage, very energized, happy, or even a bit 'trippy', from the hormonal experience. If you're not giving birth at home you will probably travel during the Ramping Up phase.

What does it feel like?

Exciting, dream-like, scary, intensifying, rhythmical, powerful, and like you are definitely going to have a baby!

5. The Cracking On Phase

Hold on to your hat, this is when it really gets interesting. You are totally, fully and unmistakably in the thickest, fullest and most intense part of labour. I've heard some midwives refer to this phase as 'Yahooing', and Miranda Hart's Chummy describes it as, "when labour really gets its boots on." Your contractions will probably come more frequently, be more intense, and last longer. You will probably not feel like talking or doing anything else. You will be in the place that some people call 'Labour Land', utterly focused on riding the waves and staying afloat.

What does it feel like?

Later on in this section we'll talk about labour pain and how some people don't experience giving birth as painful. However, many people do find this part of labour really hard work and really intense. There is still some of the golden time between contractions, but they are closer together, and the peaks of them can be, well, cracking.

6. Transition

I've deliberately not talked about dilation up til now because I really want to discourage you from worrying about measuring the opening of your cervix in centimetres and focus instead on the experience of being in labour. You may even wish to decline routine examinations to measure your dilation. However, transition means you've reached full dilation, which is roughly around 10cm, the size of a bagel or a box of cheese triangles!

Transition is a time when everything changes, hence the very apt word – transition. You will feel this, and it will be happening in your hormones as oxytocin makes way for the adrenaline you need to wake you up from Labour Land, and energise you enough to give birth. This shift from oxytocin to adrenaline may even cause you to feel 'fear' at this moment, but this doesn't mean that you cannot do it. It just means you ARE doing it.

What does it feel like?

This stage can feel hugely emotional: that you absolutely cannot go on, that you want a caesarean, that you cannot cope, or that you want to die. Transition is intense but usually brief: it is like a wave of feelings that will wash over you and then pass away as all waves do.

7. The Rest and Be Thankful Phase

This doesn't happen for all women, but some experience this 'pause', dubbed the Rest and Be Thankful Phase by birth guru Sheila Kitzinger, but rather beautifully named The Quietude by another midwife, Whapio Diane Bartlett. For some women this phase lasts long enough to cause care providers concern that labour has 'stalled'. More often than not, it hasn't, and after these moments of gathering in fortitude and courage, the majority of women will of course make the leap of faith into the final phases of bringing a new human onto the earth.

What does it feel like?

A sudden, unexpected moment of calm, like somebody pressed the pause button on the rollercoaster.

8. The Pushing Phase

Some people can take up to two hours, sometimes longer, to push their baby out, whilst others, particularly those who experience the Foetus Ejection Reflex, might go from fully dilated to baby in arms in a matter of minutes. Some women like guidance and direction at this point, whereas others prefer to spiral inwards again and listen to their body. Some find that they don't actually have to 'push' at all, and that the effort is all completely involuntary, like sneezing. You will still have contractions in the Pushing Phase, but they will feel different because you will feel compelled to push while they are happening, and some women prefer this more active phase of their labour. Like all of the phases, the Pushing Phase is most often blended in to the other neighboring phases, so what you might find is that, during the Cracking On Phase, you suddenly start to feel a bit different during contractions, or make different noises. A midwife might ask you, "Are you feeling a bit 'pushy'?", and if you are, you will instantly know what she means. This 'pushy' feeling will build and become more intense, usually so that you cannot resist it.

What does it feel like?

This active phase of labour can make you feel like being intensely quiet or roaring like a lioness. The physical sensations as your baby descends, through the cervix and down your vagina are some of the most extremely intense bodily experiences you will ever have. Some can feel themselves stretching and widening. Some feel their baby rotate and move, moment by moment. Love it or hate it, you certainly will never forget this part of labour.

9. Crowning

Many women fear this part of giving birth, affectionately named by some as the Ring of Fire. For many, there is a very strong burning sensation as the widest part of the baby's head sits momentarily in the opening of your vagina. You are stretched wide, and some women will tear or graze at this point. But not all women report any stinging or burning while their baby is crowning. It's

different for everyone, and the good news is, if you are one of the women who does not enjoy crowning, it is usually over very quickly.

What does it feel like?

Really being stretched very wide, and for some a burning or stinging sensation.

10. The head being born

As your baby crowns, one or two more pushes – which your midwife may or may not guide you through – will bring their head into the world.

What does it feel like?

One final stretching sensation, and then often a huge sense of relief, as you know the hardest part of labour is behind you.

11. The body being born

There is usually a pause after the head has been born, while you wait for the next surge to give birth to the body. After the hard work of the head, the body feels like a slippery eel, moving out of you with one final sensation of release.

What does it feel like?

Sometimes you will feel your baby wriggle to move out of you with the final contraction. Giving birth to their body is hugely triumphant and relieving. It can feel very sensual, a fantastic physical experience, perhaps even orgasmic.

12. Baby in arms

Yes, you've done it! Your baby has been born! At the moment of birth you might reach down to take your baby and bring them up to you. Other times a midwife might pass your baby up to you. Some prefer to leave their baby for a moment and take a look at them before picking them up. Some leave their baby on their stomach and let them find their own way to the breast in a move known as the Breast Crawl. Now is the time for vital Skin to Skin, and remember, there is no rush to cut the cord!

A moment of triumph for many, that magical moment of meeting your son or daughter for the first time. For others, the magic comes later on and they need some time to take stock. Physically, some feel hugely energized and on top of the world, whilst others feel utterly spent. Once the euphoria of meeting their baby has passed, many women describe feeling a little 'unfinished', as the body knows it still has work to do expelling the placenta.

13. The placenta coming out

Just when you thought you'd utterly nailed it, you realise you've still got one more job left to do, pushing out your placenta. The good news is that after a

baby this feels like a teeny tiny little friendly little portion of Jelly. Your midwives will talk you through it, and once you're done, you really ARE done this time, and you can sink back on your pillows with your baby snuggled in tight feeling like an absolute goddess.

What does it feel like?

Usually easy peasy. Sometimes quite enjoyable. And frankly, a bit weird.

14. The tea and toast phase

All being well, you are holding your baby, skin to skin. There may be a midwife or two taking an occasional peek at your nether regions, but frankly, you don't really give a damn. If you do need stitches you will get them now, but, proving for every yin there's a yang, you'll also get the best cup of tea and slice of hot buttered toast you've ever had in your life. After that you can move straight to the champers. Even if it is 7.45am. Hey, it's five o'clock somewhere.

What does it feel like?

Champion.

For the full version of this extract, and lots more information on what giving birth is like, including caesarean birth, please see the Positive Birth Book, available from all good book sellers!