



Ways to Encourage Labour

At the end of pregnancy your body is preparing itself for labour! You do not NEED anything outside of yourself to cause labour to happen, labour will happen from within just when it should. However, many women would like to do what they can to help support this internal process, using external remedies. Here is a list of several things you can do to encourage your body to go into labour. They are not well-supported by research to have a significant effect, but women and midwives report that they are helpful. They will not cause labour right away but will create gradual changes as you use them.

Mental and emotional preparation:

Spend some time visualizing the birth. Picture your baby moving lower, and your cervix opening. Rest well. Massage your belly and have someone offer you a relaxation massage. It is also helpful to reach out to people you trust to ask for support in easing your fears and stresses surrounding the birth. Do things that make you happy to promote oxytocin release. Have a good laugh. And a good cry too.

Foods:

Dates: Eating 60-70 grams of dates (6 dates on average) every day starting at 36 weeks may reduce the length of your pregnancy. One small study showed that women who ate dates every day were more likely to avoid induction of labour, and to have a shorter labour overall. It is unclear why dates may act this way, but they are also a good source of iron and other essential minerals, so it can't hurt to try.

Spicy foods: Spicy food stimulates the bowels, and as a result it may stimulate your labour. It may also stimulate your heartburn though!

Pineapple: Fresh pineapple contains an enzyme which is believed to soften the cervix.

Herbs and other remedies:

Red Raspberry Leaf: This can be purchased in pill form or as a tea. It is safe to take throughout pregnancy, and is believed to specifically tone the muscles of the uterus. Drink up to 3 cups per day in your 3rd trimester.

Other herbs: We do not recommend that you use other herbs (such as blue and black cohosh) without the direction of a qualified herbalist or naturopath.

Homeopathics: Homeopathic remedies such as Pulsatilla, Caulophyllum, Cimicifuga, and Gelsemium are often used to stimulate labour. There is anecdotal evidence from women who have found them helpful. Talk to your midwife about recommended dosing before use.

Castor oil: When ingested orally, castor oil stimulates the bowels which in turn can cause uterine contractions. It is NOT recommended to use castor oil unless your cervix and baby are ready for labour, and you have discussed your plans thoroughly with your midwife. Castor oil can work very quickly if used in the right situation, and for this reason it is important that your midwife is part of your planning.

Activities:

Breast massage: Self-breast massage can be so nourishing. The essential love and labour hormone oxytocin is released when we touch our breasts in a calm and gentle way. Consider doing this daily practice before bed, while having a relaxing bath, during meditation, or while enjoying a movie.

Getting good rest: Oxytocin levels are higher in the night when we are sleeping. Getting at least six hours of sleep per night is helpful to ensure this essential labour hormone is plentiful at the end of your pregnancy. If you had a restless night, consider trying to fit in a nap the following day to make up for it.

Exercises for optimal fetal positioning: Being upright encourages your baby to move down onto your cervix, and the movement of the baby's head on your cervix stimulates the release of oxytocin which can trigger contractions. Walking half an hour per day is also effective at reducing diabetes, depression, and high blood pressure. Positions that temporarily tilt your pelvis are also helpful. Try lunges, squats, or walking a block with one foot on the curb and the other on the street, and then switching sides for the next block. Sitting/rocking on a birth-ball can encourage good posture and assist the baby to get in the best position possible for labour. Bumpy car rides can work in the same way as exercise if you've tired yourself out.

Loving: Sex is a great way to trigger labour. Both orgasm and nipple stimulation release the hormone oxytocin, and as a bonus, semen can help soften the cervix. If you don't feel like having intercourse (and many women don't in late pregnancy!), then remember that oxytocin is released when you are feeling comfortable, safe, and loved. Not when you are stressed and trying really hard to get your labour going! Cherish these intimate moments with your body before you transition into your new role as a parent.

Acupuncture and acupressure: These techniques can be used under the guidance of a naturopath or acupuncturist. Typically, acupuncture is used for several weeks prior to the due date to stimulate labour. You can ask your midwife to demonstrate the points used for acupressure.

Stretch and sweep: This is a vaginal exam done by your midwife which involves the stretching of your cervix using her fingers. The cervix is then "swept" away from the membranes and the

baby's head in order to stimulate the release of prostaglandins. Some women find this quite painful, and other women experience only discomfort. There are several studies which show stretch and sweeps to be effective at increasing the likelihood of spontaneous labour prior to the initiation of a medical induction. Most of the time it takes several attempts to start labour. Ask your midwife if you would like to try this method.

Attitude:

Despite all the knowledge medical science has about prostaglandins, oxytocin, and the other chemical processes of early labour, no one really knows what causes labour to start. It can feel productive to do things to encourage your labour, but few of the methods mentioned above are proven scientifically to make much difference. Labour is an ancient process, and it works, often without the need for intervention. Trust that the birth process will begin on it's own and that your baby will know when it is time to come.

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