

Understanding how the body works often helps reduce fear and concern around the journey ahead as well as helps women and their partners to connect to the process. Every woman will experience labour differently, the sensations and duration. What makes every labour unique is that this is not just a physical experience, this is an emotional and psychological experience also.

Physiologically the body goes through three different processes, these are called the 'Stages of Labour'. Women often don't experience or feel these stages as such, but the body will go through these changes for your baby to be born. The first stage of labour is all about the cervix (neck of the uterus) softening and thinning then opening and dilating, allowing your baby to move downwards. The second stage of labour is where the baby moves down through the body to be born. The third stage, the birthing of the placenta.

First Stage

The muscles of the uterus work together to firstly relax and soften the cervix, then draw it upwards to allow room for your baby to move down your body to be born. There are three layers of muscle to the uterus, the outer, middle and inner. The majority of the activity through labour and birth comes from the outer and inner muscle groups. The outer muscle group run vertically, strongly tightening through contractions. The strength of the vertical muscle group contracting relaxes the lower inner circular muscle group moving the cervix upwards which opens the body.

Oxytocin is the hormone that makes your uterus tighten, released through the pituitary gland. Endorphins are your natural pain relief which works alongside oxytocin in labour, the more oxytocin released, the more women feel, the more endorphins are produced. The two hormones work in unison together, bringing forth the birth of the baby and supporting the sensations that you may feel. Endorphins also help you focus and connect to your birth experience.

In early labour the release of oxytocin is often low, so the sensations you may feel in labour may also be mild, the duration of the sensations are short with the rests between the surges being longer. Early labour is often a time where you can carry on with normal daily activities. As the strong upper muscles of the uterus move the baby downwards, pressure is experienced on your cervix which encourages the release of more oxytocin. This is a positive feedback loop, the more movement downwards, the more release of oxytocin, encouraging labour to continue until your baby is born. There are many ways you can enhance the release of oxytocin, there are also situations and experiences that may inhibit or reduce the release of the oxytocin.

Adrenaline can interfere with the release of oxytocin, so feeling safe, secure and comfortable through your labour is important.

Your relationship and communication with partners and support people as well as with your midwife is an important part of the labour and birth journey.

What you might experience

All women will experience labour and birth differently, however there are some similar experiences amongst women. As the mind and body are not separate, how you feel throughout labour can impact on your experience. How you feel emotionally is just as important as the physical sensations that come with the surges of labour.

As you move through labour there can be some emotional changes. The rise in endorphins can make you feel quite sleepy and relaxed, giving you the ability to rest in between the surges, allowing rejuvenation and a build in energy for waves that follow. It is not uncommon for women to feel a sense of ambivalence, as you get close to the birth of your baby. This time is called 'transition'.

For many women there is no sense of this change emotionally, for others there is an obvious shift. As this is hormonally driven, the feelings associated with this transitional time can be, feeling weeping or emotional or feeling a sense of tiredness and inability to continue. This is generally a short phase with women moving through gaining renewed energy for the birth of their baby. Within this time, the reflex for bearing down is building (urge to push).

Second Stage

Your body and baby are ready! Once the cervix has moved up and around your baby's head, nerves within the thinned cervix will be stimulated to initiate bearing down.

This is the uncontrollable desire to breathe your baby downwards. Some will say this is the 'urge to push'. With every surge in second stage you, your body and your baby work together. The strong thickened upper uterine muscles move your baby downwards, with every outward breathe your baby moves closer to being born. This phase of labour may just take a few surges or it could take some time.

Your baby will be placed skin to skin on your chest, here you will smell each other, make eye contact, all of this initiating the powerful cocktail of bonding and attachment hormones in both you and your baby. Once the umbilical cord has stopped pulsing blood from the placenta, partners are offered to 'cut the cord'.

What you may experience

For some women the sensations of bearing down come alongside a burst of energy, a sense of satisfaction. There may be a feeling of pressure downwards towards your perineum or maybe a feeling of movement or heat as the body starts to open.

Once your baby is born, there is often a flood of emotions, with all these surging hormones, it makes sense that this can be a time of feeling overwhelmed at meeting your new baby, becoming parents, it can be quite surreal. This is an important time, where you meet and slowly start to build the bond between parent and child.

Third Stage

Once your baby has been born, oxytocin will still be surging, encouraging your uterus to still tighten and release, this process now will be all about releasing the placenta from the side of the uterine wall. Soon after birth your baby will initiate the first breastfeed, this will stimulate more release of oxytocin which will encourage the release of the placenta. Through the releasing of the placenta, there will be blood loss, this is called lochia. Lochia is coming from the placental site as well as the endometrium (lining of your uterus). Lochia may last four to six week, slowly getting your uterus back to the pre-pregnant state.

Over the next 4 – 6 weeks, breastfeeding will also help with the involution of the uterus and with lochia. As you breastfeed your baby, oxytocin is released, contracting around your breast tissue, pushing breastmilk out through the breasts.

What you might experience

Emotions may still be running high. Some women may feel their uterus contracting birthing the placenta, others will only feel a slight period type ache or nothing at all. The birthing of the placenta may take some time, up to an hour or so, perhaps for some this process will be much quicker. Once the placenta has been born and your baby has been breastfed you will move to where you are staying postnatally. You will stay there for generally two days.

Hormones of labour

Oxytocin

- Hormone that contracts the uterus
- Bonding and attachment hormone
- Releases the placenta from the uterine wall
- Hormone that releases breastmilk from the breasts whilst breastfeeding

Endorphines

- Natural pain relief
- Helps with focus
- Calming
- Relaxation