**What are Braxton Hicks contractions?**

Braxton Hicks contractions are sporadic uterine contractions that start about 6 weeks into your pregnancy, although you won't be able to feel them that early. You probably won't start to notice them until sometime after mid-pregnancy, if you notice them at all. (Some women don't.) They get their name from John Braxton Hicks, an English doctor who first described them in 1872.

Contractions begin and the cervix gradually opens. See the stages of labor and watch a baby being born.

As your pregnancy progresses, Braxton Hicks contractions tend to come somewhat more often, but until you get to your last few weeks, they'll probably remain infrequent, irregular, and essentially painless. Sometimes, though, Braxton Hicks contractions are hard to distinguish from early signs of preterm labor.

Play it safe and don't try to make the diagnosis yourself. If you haven't hit 37 weeks yet and you're having more than four contractions in an hour — or you have any other signs of preterm labor (see below) — call your caregiver immediately.

By the time you're within a couple of weeks of your due date, your cervix has likely begun to "ripen" or gradually soften up in preparation for labor. Your contractions may get more intense and more frequent, and they may cause some discomfort. Unlike the earlier painless and sporadic Braxton Hicks contractions, which caused no obvious cervical changes, these contractions may help your cervix thin out (efface) and maybe even open up (dilate) a bit. This period is sometimes referred to as pre-labor.

How can I tell the difference between Braxton Hicks and true labor contractions?

In the days or weeks before labor, Braxton Hicks contractions may intermittently become rhythmic, relatively close together, and even painful, possibly fooling you into thinking you're in labor. But unlike true labor, during this so-called false labor the contractions don't grow consistently longer, stronger, and closer together.

What can I do if my Braxton Hicks contractions are making me uncomfortable?

If you're within a few weeks of your due date, try these measures:

- Change your activity or position. Sometimes walking provides relief. At other times, resting eases contractions. (True labor contractions, on the other hand, will persist and progress regardless of what you do.)
- Take a warm bath to help your body relax.
- Try drinking a couple of glasses of water, since these contractions can sometimes be brought on by dehydration.
• Try relaxation exercises or slow, deep breathing. This won't stop the Braxton Hicks contractions, but it may help you cope with the discomfort. (Use this opportunity to practice some of the pain-management strategies you've learned in your childbirth preparation class.)

When should I call my doctor or midwife?

Call your caregiver right away if you haven't reached 37 weeks and your contractions are becoming more frequent, rhythmic, or painful, or if you have any of these possible signs of preterm labor:

• Abdominal pain, menstrual-like cramping, or more than four contractions in one hour (even if they don't hurt)
• Any vaginal bleeding or spotting
• An increase in vaginal discharge or a change in the type of discharge — if it becomes watery, mucusy, or bloody (even if it's only pink or blood-tinged)
• More pressure in the pelvic area (a feeling that your baby's pushing down)
• Low back pain, especially if it's dull or rhythmic, or you didn't previously have back pain