



# Labor to Birth

## What to Expect

At last you've made it to the final stretch of your pregnancy: labor and delivery. Here's a brief description of the process.

### The Six Steps to Birth

The following six steps must take place before a vaginal birth. The first three usually begin weeks or days before labor, the last three during labor.

1. The cervix moves forward
2. The cervix ripens, or softens
3. The cervix effaces, thins, or shortens
4. The cervix dilates, or opens
5. The fetal head rotates
6. The fetus descends through the pelvis

### Stages of Labor

Labor divided into distinct stages according to the physiological changes that take place.

**PRE-LABOR** (*non-progressing contractions*) causes ripening, effacement, and forward movement of the cervix; ends when contractions progress (*become longer, stronger, and closer together*).

**FIRST STAGE** (*dilation*) begins with progressing contractions and ends when the cervix is completely open.

**SECOND STAGE** (*descent and birth*) begins when the cervix is fully dilated and ends when the baby is born.

**THIRD STAGE** (*delivery of the placenta*) begins with the birth of the baby and ends with the delivery of the placenta.

**FOURTH STAGE** (*recovery*) begins after the placenta is born and ends one to several hours later when the mother's condition stabilizes.

