

I am Pregnant.

what can go wrong in labour?

Most women worry about their labour. They worry about the pain. They worry about something going wrong in labour. They worry about the baby being alright. We have all heard stories of women who have had problems in giving birth to their babies. Most of the time women do have normal labour and their babies are fine. But there are things that can go wrong.

It is always good to know about these things. Then at least if something does go wrong we can understand what it is, and we can cope with it much better.

What Can Go Wrong In Labour?

These are some of the things that can go wrong in labour.

The baby could be lying in the wrong position in the womb (uterus).

The labour could be too slow.

The waters could break early in labour.

The baby's heart could slow down.

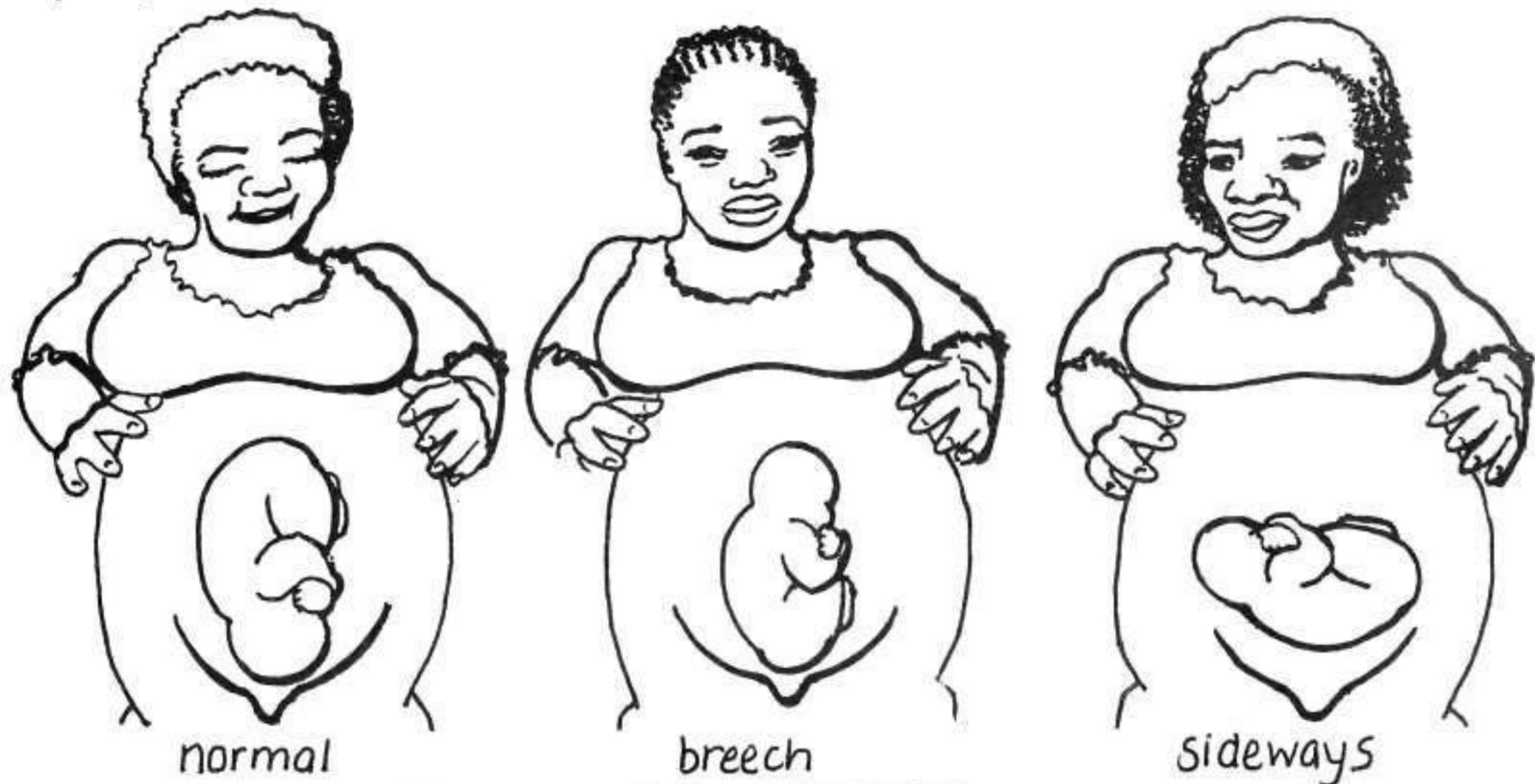
The baby may have to be delivered quickly.

What if the baby is lying in the wrong position in the womb?

Most babies are born from the vagina with their heads coming out first. Their heads are in your pelvis and their bottoms are under your ribs. But when a baby is not lying in the normal head down position the birth is always more difficult and more dangerous. Some babies lie upside down. This is called a breech baby. The baby's bottom is in your pelvis, and when you give birth this comes out first. Although a breech baby may be delivered through the vagina, the doctors may decide that it is safer to do a caesarian section operation to deliver the baby. Other babies lie sideways in the womb and they are always delivered by a caesarian section operation.

What happens if the labour is too slow?

Most women have their babies within 24 hours of starting their labour. But sometimes the contractions come slowly and are weak. And sometimes the contractions feel strong





What happens if the baby's heart slows down during labour?

When you are in labour, the midwife listens to the baby's heartbeat. She does this often with a special stethoscope that she puts on your abdomen. She counts how fast your baby's heart is beating. It normally beats at about 140 beats each minute. If there is a problem, and the baby is not getting enough oxygen, the baby's heart beat slows down. When the baby does not get enough oxygen, there can be damage to the brain and the baby may even die. So if the baby's heart beat becomes slow, this is a danger sign. The baby must be delivered quickly to prevent brain damage and death.

What can the doctor do if the baby needs to be delivered quickly?

There are different things that the doctor can do to deliver the baby quickly. If you are still in the first stage of labour then the neck of your womb is not open enough to let the baby come through. You will have to have a caesarean section operation to deliver the baby. If you are in the second stage of labour and are pushing the baby out there are 3 different things the doctor can do. If the baby's head is near the entrance of the vagina, she can do an episiotomy. If the head is still high up in the vagina then it needs to be pulled down with forceps or a vacuum extractor. Let's discuss all these things in more detail here.

What is an episiotomy?

Just before a baby is delivered, its head must push out of the vagina. The birth opening usually stretches a lot for the baby to come out. But if it does not stretch well, or if the baby needs to be delivered quickly, then the midwife may cut the birth opening. This cut is called an episiotomy. It sounds very painful, but at that stage of labour the mother does not feel the cut. This is how an episiotomy is done.

After the baby is born, the skin around the cut is injected to stop any pain. The cut is sewn up with stitches. These dissolve after a

but the neck of the womb (the cervix) does not open up. If these things happen, the mother becomes tired and weak. The baby may also get tired and distressed. Then the midwife or doctor may put up a drip. The drip has a drug in it which makes the womb contract well. But the contractions from this drug are often more painful than normal contractions. You may need an injection or gas and air to breathe to help you during the labour.

What happens if the waters break early in labour?

Sometimes the waters round the baby burst at the beginning of labour. Usually the womb starts to contract after this happens. But sometimes it does not. If the baby is not born within 24 hours of the waters bursting then germs from outside can cause an infection in the womb and even in the baby. When the baby is born she may be very sick and may even die from this infection. To stop this happening the baby must be born within 24 hours, so the midwife puts a drip up to make the womb contract. When the drip is put up a needle is put into a vein in your arm, a medicine is run through the needle straight into the blood. The blood carries the medicine to the womb and makes it contract. This makes the labour happen more quickly.

few days. These stitches may be painful. The pain is helped by salt water baths or icepacks.

Forceps Deliveries and Vacuum Extraction

If the baby needs to be delivered quickly or if the mother is very tired, the doctor may decide to pull the baby out. They can only do this in the second stage of labour when the cervix is wide open. The woman's legs are hung up in slings. She is given injections into the birth canal to take the pain away. Then the doctor can use either metal forceps or a vacuum extractor to pull the baby out. The metal forceps are slipped around the baby's head, so that they surround it like a cap. Then the doctor pulls on the handles and the baby moves down the birth canal.

A vacuum extractor is like a cup that sucks onto the top of the baby's head. It is used to pull the baby out of the birth canal. Sometimes the baby's head has a swelling on top after this has been used. But this swelling goes away after a few days.

An episiotomy



Although forceps and vacuum extractors look frightening, they do not harm the baby.

Caesarean Section Birth

Sometimes something can go wrong in labour before the cervix is fully open. The baby's heart may slow down, or the baby may be too big to pass through the mother's pelvis. In these cases the woman has to have an operation to get the baby out. This operation is called a caesarean section.

The woman is either given an anaesthetic to put her to sleep, or an injection in her back. The injection is called an epidural. This is to stop all the pain in her womb and abdomen. Then the doctor cuts through her abdomen and into the womb and pulls the baby out. After this operation, the woman is sewn up. She has a drip in her arm for the next day and she feels uncomfortable for the first week. But this soon gets better.

After a caesarean section birth.



Pain Relief in Labour

Some women find labour very painful. Some women have very long labours. These women need something to help them with the pain. There are 3 things they can have. Nitrous oxide is a gas that is breathed in through a mask when the contractions start. This is often used in transition and in the second stage of labour. Women who need pain relief in the first stage of labour will be given either an injection of pethidine or an epidural. Pethidine is a painkiller, but it makes you feel sleepy. With an epidural a drip is put up into your arm. Then you are given an injection into your back which stops all the feeling in your abdomen and uterus. If you are offered any of these things to help with the pain in your labour just ask if you really need them. Although the things that help with the pain are good in some labours, but sometimes they make it difficult for the woman to stay in control of her labour.

We wrote more about the things that help with pain in SPEAK 22.

Labour is a complicated thing. Many women need help to deliver their babies. But it is important to understand what is happening. It is your right to expect the doctor or midwife to tell you what they are doing to you and why they are doing it. It is your right to be allowed to ask the question "Why are you doing this?" And it is your right to get a good answer. Your body belongs to you. ●

Would you like to ask the SPEAK doctor about a problem you are having in your pregnancy? Or even another health problem you have? Write to: The SPEAK Doctor
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