
Medical terms and definitions during pregnancy and birth

Summary

- During pregnancy and childbirth, you may see and hear lots of different medical terms.
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Like all areas of medicine, pregnancy and childbirth has a number of specialised terms, many of which you will hear during your own pregnancy and labour and the birth of your baby. The following list provides definitions for some of the more common terms.

abortion – termination (end) of a pregnancy. This can be achieved either through a surgical procedure or by taking a combination of prescribed medications (medical abortion)

amniotic fluid – the liquid that surrounds a baby in the uterus (also called ‘waters’)

amniotic sac – the sac around the baby inside the uterus

anaesthetic – a drug that gives total or partial loss of sensation of a part or the whole of the body

anaesthetist – a doctor who specialises in giving anaesthetic

antenatal – a term that means ‘before birth’ (alternative terms are ‘prenatal’ and ‘antepartum’)

antepartum haemorrhage – bleeding from the vagina during pregnancy

Apgar score – a test given one minute after a baby is born, then again five minutes later, that assesses a baby’s appearance (skin colour), pulse, grimace (reflex), activity (muscle tone) and respiration. A perfect Apgar score is 10; typical Apgar scores are seven, eight or nine. A score lower than seven means that the baby might need help breathing

assisted reproductive technology – any procedure performed to help achieve a pregnancy

baby blues – mild depression that follows childbirth; usually the result of hormonal swings

birth canal – the passageway (made up of the cervix and vagina) that the baby travels through during birth

birth plan – a written document describing a woman’s preferences for her care during labour and birth

blood transfusion – a procedure where a woman is given blood

Braxton Hicks contractions – a tightening of the uterus (womb) that may feel like a labour contraction. Braxton Hicks contractions are not painful and do not get stronger and closer together like true contractions (also called ‘false labour’)

breaking of water – when a healthcare practitioner bursts the sac holding the amniotic fluid using an instrument with a pointy tip. Often used to speed up a labour that has slowed

breach – when the baby is positioned inside the uterus with its bottom or feet down, instead of its head

caesarean section – a surgical procedure in which a baby is delivered through a cut in the abdomen and uterus (also called a ‘C-section’)

cervix – the narrow, lower end of the uterus that softens and opens during labour to allow the baby to come out

conception – the process of becoming pregnant, when a sperm and egg join to form a single cell (alternative terms include ‘fertilisation’, ‘impregnation’ and ‘insemination’)

contraction – the often strong and painful tightening of the uterus during labour that causes the woman’s cervix to dilate and that helps push the baby through the birth canal

crowning – time during labour when the baby's head has reached the external vaginal opening and can be seen from the outside

dilation – the opening of the cervix, measured as the diameter of the cervix in centimeters

ectopic pregnancy – when a fertilised egg implants and grows outside of the uterus, usually in the fallopian tube. In most cases, an ectopic pregnancy is not viable.

embryo – the name given to a fertilised egg from the time of conception until the eighth week

epidural – a type of anaesthetic commonly used in labour where drugs are used to numb the lower half of the body

fallopian tubes – the narrow ducts or tubes in a woman's abdomen that carry the egg from the ovaries to the uterus. This is where fertilisation most often occurs

false labour – see 'Braxton Hicks contractions'

fertility – being able to conceive and carry a baby through to the end of the pregnancy

fertility treatment – medical treatment that helps a woman conceive

first-degree tear – a tear involving only the perineal skin (adjacent to the vaginal opening) that occurs at the time of delivery that doesn't always require stitches

first trimester – the first 14 weeks of pregnancy

folic acid – a B vitamin found naturally in green leafy vegetables that helps prevent anaemia and has been shown to reduce the incidence of some birth defects including spina bifida (see definition below)

fontanelles – the six soft spots on a baby's head that allow its skull to compress during birth so it can pass through the birth canal. The fontanelles completely fuse by the time the child is two years old

forceps – tong-shaped instruments placed around the baby's head to help it travel through the birth canal during childbirth

full term – when a pregnancy is a normal duration (37–42 weeks gestation)

gestation – the length of time (in days or weeks) that a baby is in the uterus

gestational diabetes – a condition that develops during pregnancy when the woman's blood sugar levels become too high because inadequate levels of insulin. The condition is treatable and usually disappears after pregnancy

gynaecologist – a doctor who has undertaken specialist training in women's health

haemorrhage – excessive bleeding

home birth – labour and delivery that takes place at home, under the supervision of a midwife

immunisation – the administration of a vaccine, often by injection, that makes the body resistant to certain bacteria or viruses

in utero – a term that means 'inside the uterus'

in vitro fertilisation (IVF) – the process used to conceive a child outside the body, where a woman's eggs are fertilised with a man's sperm then placed in the woman's uterus

incontinence – an inability to control your bladder or bowel movements

induced – when a healthcare professional tries to artificially 'start' a woman's labour

jaundice – a condition where a person's skin and the whites of their eyes take on a yellowish tinge. It is caused by an excess of a chemical called bilirubin in the blood and in newborns often resolves itself

labia – the flaps of skin around a woman's vagina

labour – the process a woman's body goes through when her baby is born

lactation consultant – a healthcare professional who is trained to provide information and support about breastfeeding

low birthweight – when a baby weighs less than 2,500 grams at birth

maternal and child health nurse – a trained nurse who specialises in the health and development of children from birth to school age

meconium – a tar-like substance passed by a baby as their first poo. Passing meconium before birth may be a sign of fetal distress

midwife – a person who has been specially trained to care for women during pregnancy, labour, birth and the post-birth period

model of care – the way maternity care is organised

morning sickness – nausea, vomiting and aversions to certain foods and smells that affect most pregnant women to some degree. Morning sickness can occur at any time of day, usually begins at four to eight weeks gestation and generally subsides by week 16 of the pregnancy

multiple pregnancy – when a woman is carrying more than one baby

natural birth – birth without any interventions for example a vaginal delivery rather than a caesarean section

neonatal period – the time from a baby's birth to four weeks of age

Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) – a unit in the hospital for babies who need a high level of special medical care

neonate – a newborn baby, up to four weeks of age

newborn – a baby between birth and four weeks old

nursery – a room in a hospital where babies can stay during the day or overnight

obstetrician – a doctor who has undertaken specialist training in pregnancy and childbirth

ovaries – the female reproductive organs that release eggs into the fallopian tubes, where they may be fertilised if sperm are present

ovulation – the monthly release of a mature egg from an ovary. A woman is most fertile around the time of ovulation

ovum – a human egg

paediatrician – a doctor who has undertaken specialist training in treating children

pelvic floor exercises – exercises a woman can do to strengthen the muscles in and around her vagina

perineal haematoma – a collection of blood, resembling a bruise, in the area between the vagina and the anus

perineum – the area between the vagina and anus

placenta – the organ that connects to the wall of the uterus, that nourishes the baby through the umbilical cord

postnatal – a term meaning 'after birth' (alternative terms are 'post-birth' and 'postpartum')

postnatal depression – a condition that affects some mothers in the days, weeks or months after giving birth

postpartum haemorrhage – when a woman loses more than 500 ml of blood after birth

premature – when a baby is born before 37 weeks gestation

prenatal – a term meaning 'before birth' (alternative terms are 'antenatal' and 'antepartum')

second-degree tear – a tear of the perineum involving both skin and muscles, but not the anus. Second-degree tears often require stitches

second-stage labour – the time from the complete dilation of the cervix (10 cm) to the birth

second trimester – the time from 14 weeks to 26 weeks of pregnancy

special care nursery (SCN) – a unit in a hospital for babies who need special medical care

spina bifida – a birth defect that occurs during the first month of pregnancy when a baby's backbone does not

fully close, leaving part of the spinal cord exposed. Spina bifida cannot be cured, but a range of treatments and management options is available

spontaneous labour – when labour starts by itself (without medical help)

stillbirth – the death of a baby after 20 weeks' gestation but before birth

stretch marks – discoloured stripey patterns that can appear on the abdomen, breasts, buttocks or legs during pregnancy because of skin stretching. They usually fade slowly after delivery

TENS machine – a 'trans-electrical nerve stimulation' machine used for pain management during labour

termination of pregnancy – see 'abortion' above

theatre – an operating room in a hospital or other health facility

third- or fourth-degree tear – a severe tear of the perineum involving the skin, muscles and anus. Stitches are used to repair these tears

third-stage labour – the time from the birth of the baby to the birth of the placenta

third trimester – the time from 26 weeks of pregnancy onwards

trimester – a time span of three months during pregnancy, each marked by different phases of fetal development

ultrasound – a scan of a woman's uterus (womb) and baby during pregnancy **umbilical cord** – the cord that connects the baby to the placenta, allowing nutrients (vitamins and minerals) and oxygen to be carried from the woman to her baby

uterus – a woman's womb

vacuum cap or ventouse – a suction cap that is sometimes used during birth to help to pull the baby out of the birth canal

VBAC (vaginal birth after caesarean) – when a woman has a vaginal birth after having had one or more previous caesarean sections

viable pregnancy – a pregnancy that is likely to continue to full term

walking epidural – an epidural that may still enable the woman to walk

water birth – where a baby is born fully submerged in water

waters – the amniotic fluid that surrounds an unborn baby inside the uterus (see 'amniotic fluid')

Where to get help

- Your **GP (doctor)**
- **Midwife**
- **Obstetrician**

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