

Terms Glossary

Alpha-feto protein (AFP)

A protein made by the liver, yolk sac and the gastrointestinal tract of the fetus, found in amniotic fluid and passed through to the mother's blood. This protein may be measured during early pregnancy in the mother to determine the risk of certain abnormalities being present in the baby.

Amniocentesis

A prenatal test performed on some women to detect fetal abnormalities. A needle is inserted through the abdominal wall of the mother and a small amount of amniotic fluid is removed, which is then tested for abnormalities.

Amnion

The innermost membrane of the amniotic sac.

Amniotic Fluid

The liquid produced by the developing fetus and the fetal membranes. Protects the fetus from trauma and variations in temperature, allows free movement and maintains oxygen supply.

Amniotic Sac

The bag that contains the fetus and the amniotic fluid. It is made up of two layers, the amnion and the chorion.

Anencephaly

A neural tube defect that causes the vault of the skull - cranium - not to develop. This condition is not compatible with life. Many babies with this condition will be stillborn while others will survive for a short period of time.

Anterior

To the front. Used to describe the position the baby is lying in if the baby is lying with its back against the mother's abdomen inside the uterus and facing her spine.

APGAR

A measurement of the newborn's response to birth and life outside the womb. The ratings, APGAR, are based on Appearance (color), Pulse (heartbeat), Grimace (reflex), Activity (muscle tone), and Respiration (breathing). The scores, which are taken at 1 and 5 minutes following birth, ranging from 1 to 10.

Asynclitism

When the baby's head is tilted to one side as it moves through the birth canal. This may be diagnosed during a vaginal examination.

Bilirubin

The orange-yellow pigment in bile, formed when red blood cells are broken down by the liver.

Blood pressure

A measure of the pressure of blood in the circulatory system. It is measured in 'millimeters of mercury' (mmHg) and written as two numbers. The first or top number is systolic pressure, meaning it is the highest level of pressure when the heart beats. The second or bottom number is the diastolic pressure, which is the lowest level of pressure when the heart relaxes between beats.

Bradycardia

Abnormally slow heart rate. In a fetus it would generally be considered to be a heart rate of less than 120 beats per minute (bpm) for more than 10 minutes.

Braxton-Hicks Contractions

Usually painless uterine contractions present from the earliest days of pregnancy. The mother may feel them from about the fifth month on. They may occur more often and become stronger as the mother gets closer to the start of true labor.

Breech

Breech is used to describe the presentation of the baby where the lower part of the body is closest to the true pelvis.

Brow Presentation

A position the baby may adopt in the uterus, where the brow line of the baby's head is presenting against the cervix.

Candidiasis

The medical term for thrush. Also called Candida.

Cephalic

Relating to the head. Cephalic is used to describe the presentation of the baby during pregnancy.

Cephalopelvic Disproportion (CPD)

The baby is too large to safely pass through the mother's pelvis.

Cerclage

Also called a 'cervical cerclage.' A type of surgery in which the cervix is stitched closed to prevent dilation and preterm labor.

Cervidil

A medication used to ripen the cervix before induction.

Cervix

Lowest region of the uterus; it attaches the uterus to the vagina and provides a passage between the vaginal cavity and the uterine cavity. The cervix, only about 4 centimeters (1.6 inches) long, projects about 2 centimeters into the upper vaginal cavity.

Cesarean

An incision through the abdominal and uterine walls for delivery of the baby; it may be vertical or more commonly horizontal.

Colostrum

This is a white fluid discharge from the breasts in the early stage of milk production

Chorion

The outermost membrane of the amniotic sac. It begins to develop at the beginning of pregnancy and develops into the placenta and the outer of the two layers that contain the fetus and the amniotic fluid.

Chorionic villi

Numerous branching projections from the maternal side of the placenta. These extend into pools of maternal blood in the uterine wall for exchange of oxygen, carbon dioxide, nutrients, and waste.

Chorionic Villus Sampling

An antenatal test performed on some women to determine whether or not fetal abnormalities are present. A small amount of the chorionic villi - the hairs on the surface of the developing placenta - are removed with a needle inserted through the mother's abdomen. These are then tested for abnormalities.

Contraction

Shortening of muscle fibers, used to describe the action of the uterus during labor.

Crowning

When the baby's head has passed through the birth canal and the top or "crown" stays visible at the vaginal opening

Cyst

An abnormal sac or cavity enclosed in a membrane and containing fluid.

Dilation

The opening up of the cervix so that the baby can pass from the uterus to the birth canal. Measured in centimeters from zero to ten.

Dystocia

The slowing down or stopping of a process. In labor, it relates to the slowing of progress.

Eclampsia

The onset of seizures or coma in a pregnant person with high blood pressure and protein in the urine. The seizures are unrelated to an existing brain condition.

Ectopic pregnancy

A pregnancy that is not inside the uterus.

Efface

The thinning of the cervix in preparation for labor and during labor as measured in percentages.

Embryo

The developing baby, from the time of conception until the seventh or eighth week of development.

Endocrine

This refers to a system of glands that secrete hormones directly into the blood.

Endometrium

The mucous membrane which lines the uterus. This lining thickens during the menstrual cycle in preparation for possible implantation after conception.

Endorphins

A hormone released by the brain to reduce pain sensations.

Engagement

The entrance of the baby's presenting part into the upper oval of the mother's pelvis. In primigravidas, engagement often takes place about two weeks before the baby's birth. In multigravidas, it can occur as late as the onset of labor.

Epidural

A common method of anesthesia used during labor. It is inserted through a catheter which is threaded through a needle, into the epidural space near the spinal cord.

Episiotomy

An incision made to the perineum to widen the vaginal opening for delivery.

Face Presentation

A position the baby may adopt in the uterus, where the baby's face is presenting against the cervix.

Fetal Attitude

Description of the baby's position in the uterus, usually describing the degree of flexion of the head and the position of other body parts. A normal attitude is when the fetus has its head tucked in with the chin close to the chest, with arms and legs tucked in close to its body. An abnormal attitude is when the fetus has its head bent back, or extended, at the neck, or arms and legs in abnormal positions such as behind the body.

Fetal Distress

Condition, when the baby is not receiving enough oxygen or, is experiencing some other complication.

Fetal Lie

This describes the position of the baby in relation to the axis of the mother's uterus. If the axis of the head to tow of the fetus is parallel with the axis of the mother's head to tailbone, the baby is said to have a longitudinal lie. If they are at 90 degrees to each other, the baby has a transverse lie.

Fetal Position

The relationship of the fetus to the four quadrants, or sections, of the maternal pelvis. The baby is described as being anterior (to the front of the pelvis), posterior (to the back), left (to the left side of the mother) or right (to the right side of the mother).

Fetal Presentation

The part of the fetus that is closest to the true pelvis.

Fetal Station

A description of the distance of the fetal presenting part in relation to the ischial spines of the mother's pelvis. The fetal station is measured in centimeters and described as being above or below the ischial spines. For example, a station of -2 would describe the baby as being 2 cm above the ischial spines, while a station of +1 would describe the baby as being 1 cm below the ischial spines. A station of 0 describes the baby as being level with the ischial spines.

Fetus

The developing baby, from about the seventh or eighth week of development until birth.

Fontanelle

Soft spots between the unfused sections of the baby's skull. These allow the baby's head to compress slightly during passage through the birth canal.

Forceps

Tong-shaped instrument that may be used to help guide the baby's head out of the birth canal during delivery.

Fundus

The top or uppermost portion of the uterus.

General Anesthesia

The absence of consciousness, induced by anesthesia. The medication is given either by injection or inhaled. Intubation and respiratory assistance may be required.

Gestation

The period from the point of conception until birth.

Gestational Diabetes

A form of diabetes that is believed to exist in some women during pregnancy.

Hemoglobin

A protein in red blood cells that carries oxygen throughout the system and is made up of iron and other molecules.

Hormones

A chemical substance, produced within the body, that regulates an organ's activity or a group of cells. Examples are adrenaline, endorphins and prolactin.

Hyperbilirubinemia

Excessively high levels of bilirubin in the blood.

Hypoxia

Lack of oxygen. Severe hypoxia leads to asphyxia.

Incompetent cervix

A weakened cervix effaces and dilates in early pregnancy contributing to preterm labor.

Induction

Artificially starting labor by the use of medication or other methods, such as rupturing the membranes

Insulin

A hormone produced in the pancreas that regulates the amount of glucose in the blood.

Intravenous

Within a vein. Used to refer to the administration of fluids or medicine that is given directly into the vein using a needle.

Intubation

Passage of a tube into the body, specifically, a breathing tube is passed through the nose or mouth into the trachea to ensure there is an airway during general anesthesia.

Jaundice

A yellowish tinge to the skin and eyes, caused by abnormally high levels of bilirubin in the blood. Physiological jaundice is a common and normal condition in newborn babies, as their body removes the additional red blood cells that they no longer need.

Kangaroo Care

A method of caring for a premature baby where the baby is held skin-to-skin with the parent to help stabilize the baby's condition.

Lightening

The sensation the mother feels when the baby "drops" down or gradually settles into the pelvis as the presenting part becomes engaged.

Local Anesthesia

Anesthesia used to prevent the transmission of nerve impulses in a specific part of the body.

Meconium

The first bowel movement passed by the newborn baby. It is dark (almost black) and sticky.

Membranes

The protective bag surrounding the baby in the uterus, composed of 2 layers called the amnion and chorion.

Miscarriage

The spontaneous expulsion of a fetus from the uterus before it is able to survive.

Myometrium

The smooth outer muscle layer of the uterus that is responsible for contractions. Compare with endometrium.

Neonatologist

A specialist who cares for newborns.

Neural tube defect

Incomplete closing of the neural tube in an embryo during early pregnancy resulting in defects in the brain and spinal cord, such as spina bifida.

Nuchal Cord

Describes the position of the umbilical cord when it is wrapped around the baby's neck during birth.

Nuchal Hand

A fetal presentation where the baby is lying with its hand up against its head or neck.

Occiput

The back of the head. Used to refer to the part of the baby's head that is presenting during labor.

Oligohydramnios

Low levels of amniotic fluid. Compare with polyhydramnios.

Ovary

Part of the female reproductive system. An organ on each side of the uterus in which ova, or eggs, are produced. The ovum travel from the ovary to the uterus through the fallopian tubes.

Ovum

The reproductive cell produced in the ovary needed for conception. Plural: ova. Commonly called "egg."

Oxytocics

A class of drugs that cause the uterus to contract by mimicking the action of natural oxytocin.

Oxytocin

A naturally occurring hormone within the body, that causes the uterus to contract.

Perineum

The external tissue surrounding the urethra, vagina and anus; the space between the vagina and anus where an episiotomy would be done if needed.

Palpation

To feel or touch. Used in pregnancy or labor to refer to touching the mother's abdomen to determine the position of the baby, degree of descent of the baby, and strength of contractions.

Placenta

The organ that develops at the same time as the fetus which implants on the maternal uterine wall. It exchanges nutrients from the maternal blood supply to the fetus and waste products from the fetus to the maternal blood for elimination.

Placenta accreta

An abnormally attached placenta that implants too deeply into the uterine wall, extending beyond the normal boundary and reaching to the myometrium. The placenta does not separate normally after birth.

Placenta increta

An abnormally attached placenta where the chorionic villi extend into the myometrium. This is a more severe abnormality than placenta accreta.

Placenta percreta

The most severe type of abnormal placental attachment. The chorionic villi of the placenta extend through the myometrium and into the abdominal cavity, sometimes attaching to the bladder, intestines, or other organs.

Placenta previa

When the placenta implants low in the uterus and partially or completely covers the cervix.

Placental abruption

This occurs when the placenta partially or completely separates from the uterine wall prior to the birth of the baby.

Polycystic ovarian syndrome

A condition in biological females of reproductive age in which there is an abnormal ovarian function with elevated levels of male hormones, called androgens. It is characterized by an absence of ovulation, irregular or no menstrual periods, obesity, excess hair growth, and insulin resistance. May lead to the development of cysts in the ovaries.

Polyhydramnios

Excessive levels of amniotic fluid. Compare with oligohydramnios.

Posterior

To the rear or back. Used to describe the position the baby is lying in if the baby is facing the mother's spine inside the uterus.

Preeclampsia

A condition in pregnancy marked by high blood pressure, protein in the urine, and sometimes fluid retention.

Presentation

Refers to the part of the baby that can first be felt through the cervix upon vaginal exam; the part of the baby which will first enter the birth canal

Cephalic- head first, occurs in more than 95% of births

Breech – one or both feet or buttocks first, occurs in 3.5% of births

Shoulder – (transverse lie) baby lying sideways in the uterus, occurs in less than 1.5% of births

Primigravida

A woman pregnant with her first child.

Primipara (primip)

A woman who is given birth to her first child.

Prolactin

A hormone produced by the anterior pituitary gland that stimulates breastmilk production.

Prostaglandin

A group of hormone-like substances made up of unsaturated fatty acids that work in a wide range of body functions such as the contraction and relaxation of smooth muscles including the uterus

Station

The relationship of the baby's presenting part to the mother's ischial spines.

Sutured

A wound or incision that has been brought together and closed by sewing with medical thread.

Tachycardia

An abnormally high, or elevated, heart rate. In a fetus it would generally be considered to be a heart rate of more than 160 beats per minute (bpm) for more than 10 minutes. Compare with bradycardia.

Umbilical Cord

The cord that joins the fetus to the placenta, providing nutrients and enabling wastes to be eliminated.

Uterine Rupture

A pathological condition describing a complete tear of the uterine wall.

Uterus

The bag of muscle where the fetus develops.

Vaginal Examination

An internal examination to assess cervical dilatation, length, and position.

Vertex presentation

A position adopted by the baby in the uterus, where the back or top of the baby's head is presenting against the cervix. Compare with face presentation and brow presentation.

Womb

The bag of muscle where the fetus develops. Also called the uterus.