When Labor and Birth Don’t Go by the Book

You’ve done everything you can to prepare for a smooth labor and birth. But what if something does not go the way you planned? Complications are never welcome, but they do happen. It’s normal to feel sad if your labor and birth are different from what you expected, but you can still have a fulfilling and positive experience. Here are some examples of “unplanned events.”

**Premature labor**
Some women go into labor prematurely, at less than 37 weeks of pregnancy. We don’t always know why this happens, but it is sometimes associated with a multiple pregnancy (twins, triplets, etc.), bag of water breaking or a weak cervix. Depending on how far along you are in your pregnancy, your care provider may recommend bed rest, IV fluids and/or medications.

**Precipitous (Rapid) labor**
This is a labor that goes very fast, usually in less than three hours. Some women have a history of fast labors, especially women who have had a number of pregnancies. Occasionally, a woman may not realize she is in active labor and things move along without her knowing it. If your labor goes very fast, you may feel overwhelmed and out of control. Your labor support team will help you through this.

When labor goes quickly in the hospital, the support person will stay with mom while the nurse calls the care provider and prepares what is needed. But if mom is ready to give birth before getting to the hospital or care provider, the support person should:

- Call 911.
- Make mom comfortable.
- Support the mother’s perineum with your hand and allow the baby’s head to be delivered slowly.
- Wipe the baby’s face, supporting its head as the shoulders are delivered.
- Do not tie or cut the cord. It can be left alone until help arrives.
- Dry the baby.
- Put the baby to mom’s breast or on mom’s tummy, skin-to-skin, for warmth.
- Keep mom and baby warm as you wait for help to arrive.

**Prolonged labor**
This is a labor that lasts more than 20 to 24 hours. Sometimes a woman’s contractions may not be strong enough or frequent enough to “open” and thin the cervix. In other cases, the size or position of the baby, or the size and shape of the mother’s pelvis, may slow the labor. Also, medications given early in labor can affect the progress. Your care provider and nurse will help you through a long labor. Some things that may help are changing positions, walking, showering and practicing relaxation techniques.

**Assisted delivery**
Some births may require your care provider to use forceps or a vacuum extractor to assist with the birth of your baby.
Cesarean birth
Non-emergency: There are several situations that may bring about the need for a surgical (Cesarean) birth rather than vaginal. In these cases, spinal or epidural anesthesia may be given and the support person may be allowed to stay with mom. Examples of reasons for non-emergency Cesarean birth are:

- The position of the baby would make a vaginal delivery difficult or impossible.
- The placenta is located over or near the cervix (called “placenta previa”).
- Mother has a medical condition such as diabetes, high blood pressure and/or pre-eclampsia, heart or kidney disease, or active genital herpes.
- There is prolonged labor.

Emergency: Certain complications may bring about the need for emergency Cesarean birth, such as when the umbilical cord delivers before the baby (prolapse) or the placental is separating before the birth of the baby (abruption). Things may begin to happen very quickly. This may seem overwhelming, but your labor support team will help you through it. In an emergency, mom may be put to sleep with general anesthesia and the support person may not be allowed in the room. Bonding is then promoted as soon after birth as possible.

Premature or sick infant
Some babies need special medical care after delivery and may need to spend some extra time in the nursery. On occasion, they may need to be transferred to a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). Should your baby need to be transferred for even more advanced care, the support person or another family member may follow the infant.

Visiting and caring for your baby as much as possible helps both parents and baby. Your caregiver will identify the best plan of care for you and your baby.