

Early labour: women's expectations and experiences

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Background

Early labour is a major challenge for all involved [1,2]. A women-centred approach that considers women's need requires more knowledge about their individual experiences [3]. Therefore, this study aimed to generate in-depth knowledge of:

- primiparous women's preparation for early labour
- their expectations
- physical and emotional symptoms of onset of labour

Method and Material

We conducted four focus group discussions with a total of n=18 mothers who had given birth to their first child in the previous six months. Two researchers coded and summarised the women's statements into themes. Qualitative content analysis was applied using Atlas.ti 9.

Findings

Four themes emerged from women's narratives:

Themes	Codes
Preparing for the unpredictable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Antenatal preparation for early labor • Handling information about early labor
Expectations and reality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expectations of the onset of labor • Expectations of early labor • Reality in the context of expectations
Perception and wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical symptoms • Emotions • Sleeping behavior • Exhaustion
Experiencing the beginning of birth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Realizing that labor was really starting • Experiencing early labor at home • Experiencing early labor in the hospital • Experiences of early labor by the accompanying person

Many women could not distinguish the preparation for early labour from that for the whole birth.

References

- 1) Ängeby et al. 2015 Primiparous women's preferences for care during a prolonged latent phase of labour. *Sexual & Reproductive Healthcare*
- 2) Kobayashi et al. 2017. Assessment and support during early labour for improving birth outcomes. *The Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*
- 3) Grylka-Baeschlin et al. 2022. Development and validation of a tool for advising primiparous women during early labour: study protocol for the GebStart Study, *BMJ Open*

Findings continued

Not meeting expectations was a big challenge for some participants. Physical and emotional symptoms of onset of labour differed greatly from woman to woman.

"... I don't know how much this affects the start, but I did yoga and perineal massage and Epi-No..."
(FGD2)

"I had not imagined that it could go on for days. I was not aware of that, because I thought it would be so intense over a shorter time or with longer intervals over several days."
(FGD 4)

"... I was already so scared in my head, I got even more into it and even more scared. ..." (FGD1)

"I woke up in the night with my waters breaking and I woke up laughing because I thought "oh, now something is finally happening". (FGD2)

Conclusion

- The individual character of experiencing onset of labour and early labour was striking which highlighted the great need of women-centred early labour care.
- Further research is needed to investigate how the findings of this study could be used to improve advising and caring for women during early labour.

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