

BREECH CHILDBIRTH



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You are having a baby. Learn what you need to know about breech childbirth.

What is breech childbirth?

Most babies are positioned head down in the womb. This is so they can come out of the birth canal (vagina) head first. Sometimes, the baby is positioned so the feet or buttocks will come out first during childbirth. This is called a breech presentation.

There are three ways a breech baby might be positioned:



< Frank breech: Legs point up with feet by the baby's head.



< Complete breech: Legs folded with feet at the level of the buttocks.



< Footling breech: One or both feet point down so the legs would emerge first.

Why are some babies breech?

Often, there is no obvious reason why a baby is breech. It may simply be that your baby is most comfortable in this position. Some factors that may influence why a baby might be in breech position are:

- labour earlier than 37 weeks
- too much or too little of the liquid (amniotic fluid) around the baby in the womb
- more than one fetus in the womb
- the length of the umbilical cord
- the size of the uterus
- an irregularly shaped uterus or uterine fibroids (non-cancerous growths on the wall of the uterus)
- certain physical abnormalities in the baby

A breech birth usually does not affect your baby's long-term health.

How are breech babies delivered?

In Canada, it was common for most breech babies to be delivered through a caesarean section (C-section). With this method, the baby is delivered through incisions made in the mother's stomach. Today, health-care professionals recommend that in some circumstances, breech babies may be delivered the traditional way, through the vagina. Vaginal childbirth has health benefits for the mother such as a faster recovery and less pain, as well as a better chance of having a vaginal childbirth in the future.

When can a mother deliver her baby the traditional way?

It may be possible to deliver a breech baby vaginally if your health-care professional is trained in vaginal breech childbirth and other birth factors are normal:

- Labour occurs at term date (40 weeks)
- The baby is the correct weight
- The baby is in complete or frank breech position
- You and your baby are otherwise healthy with no abnormalities

What happens during vaginal breech childbirth?

The head is the widest part of the baby's body. During normal vaginal childbirth, it would come out first. However, in a breech vaginal birth, the head comes out last.

During vaginal breech childbirth, your obstetrician will ask you to push your baby out to the point where the legs and lower belly are delivered. Once the baby's lower belly is out, your obstetrician will support the baby's body and, with the help of an assistant (such as a nurse or midwife), will perform a rotational manoeuvre to deliver the arms and head. This manoeuvre, accompanied by your pushing efforts, will help your baby's head pass through your pelvis. In some cases, your obstetrician may use other manoeuvres or an instrument called a forceps to help deliver your baby's head.

Even if you and your doctor decide to try a vaginal childbirth, a C-section may be necessary for you and your baby's well-being if the labour is not progressing properly. For this reason, a breech delivery should happen in a hospital, where a C-section is available if you need one.

When is a caesarean section recommended?

With a breech presentation, your doctor may recommend a C-section if:

- labour is not progressing normally
- the umbilical cord comes out before the baby
- the baby is not in complete or frank breech position

A C-section, like any major surgery, has its risks, such as increased bleeding, pain, or infection. The recovery time is longer than vaginal childbirth, so expect to stay in the hospital longer. Once you go home, you will need to take it easy by avoiding any strenuous activities while you heal. Talk to your health-care professional about recovering from a C-section.

How do I know the baby's position?

You probably will not know the position of your baby in the womb. You will likely find out if your baby is breech towards the end of pregnancy or when labour has started. A health-care professional will examine you to feel the position of the baby's head, back, and buttocks. Ultrasound will be used to confirm the position. This produces an image of the baby inside the womb you may view on screen.

Changing the baby's position

Most babies are positioned head down in the last four weeks in the womb, but if your baby is breech, and you are past your 36th week of pregnancy, your health-care professional may try to turn the baby around so its head is down near the birth canal. A technique called *version* is used to gently roll the baby around so the head is in the best position for labour and delivery. Your health-care professional will place his or her hands on your abdomen, then push or lift. You may be given a medication to relax the uterus and make the *version* procedure easier.

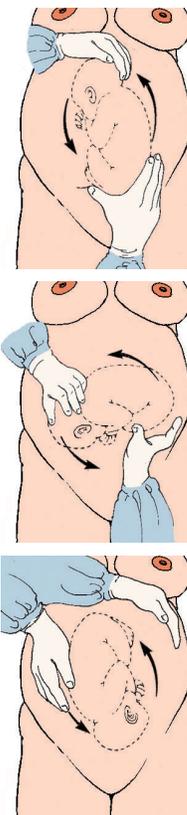
During the procedure, your baby's heart rate will be monitored and ultrasound may be used to check the baby's position. Very rarely, *version* may cause problems with the baby's heart rate or lead to early labour. Your health-care professional will be ready to deliver your baby if necessary, vaginally or by C-section.

Sometimes, the baby will move back into breech position. If you believe your baby has switched positions again, discuss this at your next prenatal check-up. Your health-care professional may try *version* again, but as the baby grows in the final weeks of pregnancy, there is less room for movement in the womb.

Finally...

A breech childbirth does not necessarily mean you will have a C-section. Your health-care provider will help you understand your options so you can make the best decision for your health and the health of your baby.

Version procedure



To learn more about breech childbirth, look at these resources:

- "Healthy Beginnings: Giving your baby the best start from preconception to birth" - www.sogc.org/healthybeginnings
- The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada's guideline on "Vaginal Delivery of Breech Presentation" - www.sogc.org/guidelines