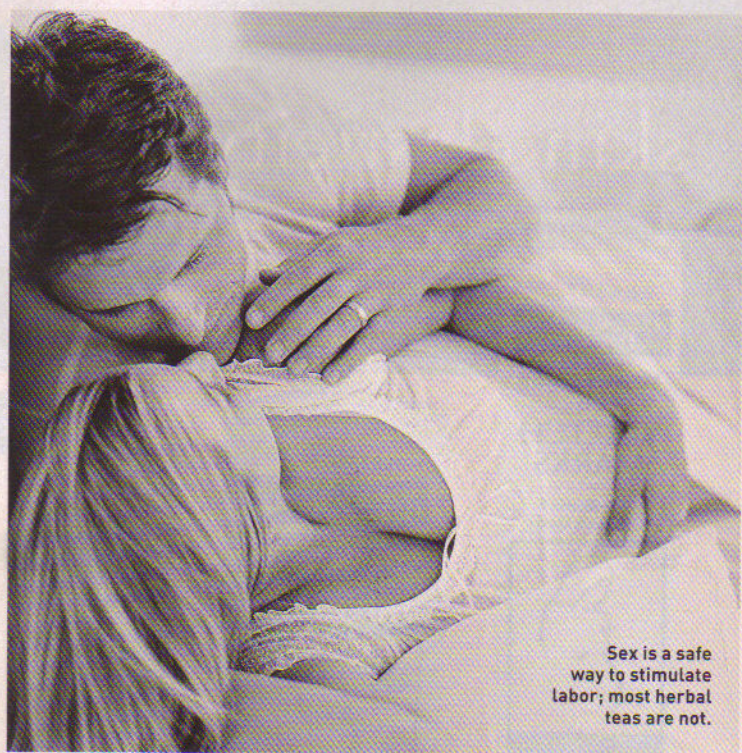


# labor starters

From acupuncture to MSG, what brings on contractions, what doesn't and what's **dangerous**



Sex is a safe way to stimulate labor; most herbal teas are not.



**T**en days past my due date, I was tempted to try every old wives' tale I came across to induce labor. I ended up taking a girlfriend's advice and went out for a spicy Indian dinner; by the time the check came, my contractions had started. Coincidence? To find out, we lined up some often-tried labor starters and asked which ones work, which don't and which are downright dangerous. Because many common remedies not covered here, especially herbal ones, have not been scientifically studied, no one knows for sure if they work—and, more important, if they're safe. Better to avoid them and just have your baby a little later.

## WHAT WORKS

**>> Acupuncture/acupressure** Is it safe? Yes. "Acupuncture can safely help induce labor, but get your physician's consent first," says Peter J. Degnan, M.D., an integrative-medicine physician and medical acupuncturist at Equinox Health and Healing in Portsmouth, N.H. "At 40 weeks, we also often perform acupressure on the web between the thumb and

index finger of both hands to stimulate uterine contractions." Several studies reported in *The International Journal of Clinical Acupuncture* and elsewhere have found that acupuncture also can accelerate slow or stalled labor.

**>> Sex** Is it safe? Yes, unless you have signs of infection (fever, pelvic pain), your water has broken or you are in active labor. "Prostaglandins [chemicals that soften the cervix and initiate labor] in semen and the uterine contractions that occur with orgasm can help," Degnan says.

## WHAT DOESN'T WORK

**>> Bumpy car rides** Are they safe? No. The concept that stimulating the cervix would start labor might be how this old wives' tale got started. "The risks seem to far outweigh any possible benefits, since there are no clear ones," says Siobhan M. Dolan, M.D., assistant medical director of the March of Dimes and an assistant professor of obstetrics, gynecology and women's health at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York.

# labor & delivery

» **Herbal teas** Are they safe? Some are, some aren't. Raspberry-leaf tea is safe, but it won't start labor. And tea containing the uterine-stimulating herb black cohosh can be dangerous, Dolan says: "The uterine contractions that result can be so harsh that complications like placental abruption [a separation of the placenta from the uterus before the baby is born] can result." Many other herbal teas have not been adequately studied and should be avoided during pregnancy.

» **Massage** Is it safe? Yes. "Massage can't start labor, but massaging the back during a contraction can help relax and open the pelvic floor, allowing for an easier delivery," says prenatal-massage therapist Denise Borrelli, Ph.D., a spokes-

Only 5 percent of women deliver on their due date, according to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.

woman for the American Massage Therapists Association. There is no scientific evidence that so-called aromatherapy massage will work. And massaging the perineum—the area around the vagina—will not start labor, either, Dolan says.

» **Spicy foods/MSG** Are they safe? Yes (though MSG should be limited). "Spicy foods are safe, but I've never seen that eating them [at term] can induce labor," Degnan says.

## WHAT MAY OR MAY NOT WORK

» **Breast stimulation** Is it safe? Yes. "Breast stimulation results in the release of oxytocin, a hormone that brings about uterine contractions," Dolan says. "But it's impossible to say whether it can start labor."

» **Castor oil** Is it safe? No, because while small doses may actually be safe, women often ingest large amounts. The results can include dangerously precipitous labor and delivery, as well as diarrhea, which can quickly lead to dehydration. "Castor oil's risks definitely outweigh any possible benefit," Dolan says.

» **Primrose oil** Is it safe? Yes. Primrose oil is a supplement containing a fatty acid that the body converts to prostaglandins. Taken orally or applied to the cervix, it can help soften the cervix. "You risk overstimulating the cervix or uterus, but this is unlikely," Dolan says. 