

# Pregnancy

## What to expect when it's past your due date

### **When is a pregnancy considered overdue?**

A pregnancy is usually completed in 38 to 42 weeks. “Post-term pregnancy,” “prolonged pregnancy” and “post-date pregnancy” are all words used to describe a pregnancy that lasts beyond 42 weeks. About 5 percent of pregnancies are post-term.

### **How is my due date determined?**

Your due date is estimated on the basis of the first day of your last menstrual period and on the size of your uterus (womb) early in your pregnancy. An ultrasound exam may also give your doctor information about how far along your pregnancy is.

It's important to have an accurate due date to avoid the possibility of post-term pregnancy. A reliable way to know your due date is to count from the first day of your last menstrual period. However, many women cannot remember the first day of their last menstrual period and are not sure when they got pregnant. In addition, it's usually hard for your doctor to provide an accurate due date if you get pregnant soon after you stop taking birth control pills. Sometimes it takes a few months for your periods to become regular after you stop taking birth control pills.

An early pelvic examination to measure the size of the uterus can be helpful. If you're not sure about the date of your last menstrual period or your uterus is smaller or larger than expected, an early ultrasound exam is helpful.

### **What will my doctor recommend if my pregnancy goes one week past the due date?**

If your pregnancy lasts one week or more past your expected due date, your doctor will usually begin checking your baby more closely. Your doctor may check your baby's heart beat, using an electronic fetal monitor, one or two times a week. In addition, an ultrasound exam might be done to look at the amniotic fluid around your baby. Ultrasound can also be used to see how much your baby is moving. You should continue to feel your baby move throughout your pregnancy. Decreased fetal movement may be a sign that your baby is not getting enough oxygen. If either one of the tests is abnormal, your doctor may recommend inducing (starting) labor. In addition, your doctor may begin checking your cervix to see if it's dilated and thinned.

---

**What will my doctor recommend if my pregnancy goes two weeks past the due date?**

Many doctors induce labor if a patient is two weeks past her due date. This is to avoid complications such as fetal distress or a baby that gets too large to deliver easily. Fetal distress occurs when the baby doesn't get enough oxygen. Then the baby's heart rate drops, and the baby can't tolerate the stress of labor.

**How will my doctor induce labor?**

Labor can be induced in some patients by using a medicine called oxytocin (brand name: Pitocin), which causes contractions to start. Oxytocin is given through your veins. It starts to work in one to two hours.

Labor can also be induced in some patients by rupturing the membranes (breaking the bag of water) or sweeping (stripping) the membranes. A pelvic exam is required to break the bag of water or to sweep the membranes. If the cervix is closed and is not favorable for inducing labor and all of the tests of the baby are completely normal some doctors will allow the pregnancy to go on for one more week.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.



*The American Academy of Family Physicians, one of the nation's largest medical specialty groups, is committed to promoting and maintaining high standards for family doctors—the doctors who give ongoing, comprehensive care to people of all ages.*

© 1996 American Academy of Family Physicians  
8880 Ward Parkway, Kansas City, MO 64114-2797  
<http://www.aafp.org>

Permission is granted to reproduce this material for nonprofit educational uses. Written permission is required for all other uses, including electronic uses.