

## The Problem with Due Dates

There are a few things to consider about due dates. First we say that pregnancy lasts 40 weeks. This isn't actually the case.

The term "due date" is a misconception (no pun intended!). It implies that you are "due" to have your baby by a specific date; in fact, this is not the case.

You are not "due" to have your baby by 40 weeks. You are not "overdue" when you hit that magic date. Every pregnancy will last a different amount of time. Anywhere between 37 and 43 weeks is considered normal. 80% of babies are born within the 2 weeks before or after 40 weeks and only about 5% of babies are born on their "due dates."

It was noticed that pregnancy lasts approximately 10 moon cycles which would be 40 weeks. This is where this number came from. The average pregnancy is actually 40 weeks + 3 days and the average first time pregnancy is actually 41 weeks + 1 day. Therefore, as a first time mom, if you are at 40 weeks + 8 days you haven't even gone beyond the average.

We use averages as if they mean something expected or ideal. There is nothing ideal about being average.

Average only means the average of when all women give birth. Average could mean for every baby born 14 days before, there is one that is 14 days after. Another way of stating that is 50% of babies will be born before their due date and 50% will be born after. We are not striving to be in the middle, it just gives us a framework to expect for. Anytime within the 3 weeks before or after that date could be when your baby decides to arrive.

Another problem with due dates is how we calculate them.

Most dates are calculated based on the first day of your last menstrual period. We add 40 weeks to that number and that is your due date. This does not factor in ovulation and conception dates. Every woman's cycle is different; some are 28 days and some are 35 days. We typically ovulate in the middle of our menstrual cycles but this is not necessarily the case for all women. Ovulation could be on day 11 or day 21 or anywhere in between. That means a 10 day discrepancy on the 40 week pregnant mark. Adding 38 weeks to the date of conception, if known, would be more accurate,, but again that date would just give you a better time range for adding 3 weeks before or after.

Ultrasound is yet another confusing factor for calculating a due date.

Many women have their due dates changed based on ultrasound. Again we are basing this on averages. When measuring a fetus we say, "Based on the size of the fetus, it is X days/weeks old, therefore your due date is..." which assumes that all people grow and develop at the same rate. This would be like saying, "You are 4 foot 10 today so that means you are 12 years and 52 days old." or like saying, "OK you have now developed the beginning of breast tissue so you are 12 years and 82 days old."

Everyone grows and develops within individual time lines. Averages don't mean anything. An average just means that if you take the entire population and plot it out, we average at certain mean numbers. Most are above or below and a few will actually fall exactly on the average. To say your baby is a certain age because of the average, is not an accurate estimation for a pregnancy.

Can we expect a baby born to two six foot parents to be the same size as a baby born to two 5 foot parents? How can we say they will be the same size on the same date when one may end up being 9 pounds and the other barely 6 pounds by the end of the pregnancy.

Add in human error; when looking at measuring crown to rump length, you may get completely different measurement with different technicians. Ultrasound can be off by as much as 4 weeks when dating a pregnancy. Accuracy with dating is higher early in pregnancy than it is in later pregnancy.

If you truly have no other way of guestimating your due date earlier ultrasounds are more accurate than later ones. This is because fetal development in the very early stages is more consistent from baby to baby than in later weeks.

So where does that leave us?

We need to be a lot more relaxed with our expectations about due dates.

It is advisable that moms be ready by 37 weeks and then add 3 weeks to the 40 week date so that you don't start to feel like "the baby is going to stay in forever!" When you get into your head that your baby will be born by a certain date, you can start to get frustrated and upset about still being pregnant. When people ask your "due date" give them a month or a range like "anytime from mid September to late October." This creates less focus on a specific date or time frame.

Many hospitals and care providers have made it a policy to limit the length of a pregnancy, leading to unnecessary inductions. Women are frequently told they "must" be induced because they are 10 days post dates (40 weeks+10 days). When there is no medical reason for this induction, forcing a baby to come before it is ready leads to riskier births with interventions, and it can also cause the baby to be born premature. Many babies taken before labor starts naturally are born with signs of prematurity even when Mom is considered full term.

***From An Empowered Woman's Guide to a Healthy Pregnancy by Dr Nancy Salgueiro***