



Nurturing Your Journey

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A GUIDE FROM MY DOULA DAWN

Contraction Timer & *Labor* Guide

What to Do at Every Stage of Labor

When labor starts, everything feels real. But how do you know when it's actually time to go to the hospital or birth center? This guide will teach you how to time contractions correctly, what to expect at each stage of labor, and how to stay in control every step of the way.

WHAT'S INSIDE

- ✦ How to time contractions the right way
- ✦ The 4-1-1 rule for knowing when to go
- ✦ The 3 stages of labor, explained
- ✦ The biggest timing mistakes to avoid

GETTING STARTED

How to Time Contractions the Right Way

✦ WHAT ARE CONTRACTIONS?

- ✦ Your uterus is tightening to help move your baby down and open your cervix.
- ✦ They start mild & irregular, but get longer, stronger & closer together as labor progresses.
- ✦ Timing contractions helps determine if labor is real, or just practice contractions (Braxton Hicks).

✦ HOW TO TIME CONTRACTIONS

- ☐ Start the timer at the beginning of one contraction
- ☐ Stop the timer when the contraction ends
- ☐ Write down (or use an app) how long the contraction lasted
- ☐ Time from the start of one contraction to the start of the next — not end to start

✦ **Dawn's Tip:** Don't obsess over a single contraction. What matters is the overall pattern over an hour, not any one data point.

Real-World Example *Close, but not yet regular*

✦ 4 → 4 → 4 → 7 → 6 → 2 → 4 → 8 → 4 → 4 minutes apart

- ✦ A few of these gaps land right around 4 minutes — but the pattern keeps jumping around instead of steadily tightening.
- ✦ In most cases, a pattern this irregular means you're still in early labor, often under 3 cm dilated, even when a few individual gaps look close together.
- ✦ True active labor usually shows a consistent, steadily-closing pattern — not occasional close contractions mixed in with far-apart ones.

KNOW WHEN

When to Go to the Hospital or Birth Center

✦ THE 4-1-1 RULE

4 minutes apart: Contractions are spaced 4 minutes apart

1 minute long: Each contraction lasts 1 full minute

For 1 hour: This pattern continues for a full hour

✦ EXCEPTIONS — GO IN SOONER IF

- ✦ Your water breaks and the fluid is green or brown (possible meconium).
- ✦ You're bleeding like a period (light spotting is normal).
- ✦ You feel intense pressure or the urge to push.
- ✦ You have a high-risk pregnancy — ask your provider about early signs to watch for.

✦ **Dawn's Tip:** *If contractions suddenly get very strong and close together, go in sooner. The 4-1-1 rule is a guideline, not a rigid gate.*

THE FULL ARC

The 3 Stages of Labor & What to Do at Each

Stage 1: Early & Active Labor (0–7 cm)

- ✦ Contractions start mild & irregular, then grow stronger & closer together.
- ✦ Mucus plug & bloody show may appear.
- ✦ Water may break, but doesn't always.

What helps:

- ✦ Stay home as long as possible — early labor can last hours.
- ✦ Move around — walking, birth ball, swaying.
- ✦ Breathing techniques, warm baths & distractions.

Stage 2: Transition & Pushing (7–10 cm)

- ✦ Intense contractions, 1–2 minutes apart.
- ✦ You may feel nausea, shaking, or overwhelming pressure.
- ✦ Urge to push — only push once fully dilated.

What helps:

- ✦ Stay focused on breathing — slow exhales control intensity.
- ✦ Try different pushing positions.
- ✦ Work with your contractions, don't fight them.

✦ STAGE 3: DELIVERING THE PLACENTA

- ✦ After baby is born, you'll have a few mild contractions.
- ✦ The placenta detaches & is delivered, usually within 5–30 minutes.

✦ **Dawn's Tip:** Delayed cord clamping is an option — talk to your provider about your preferences ahead of time so it's already on your birth plan.

AVOID THESE

The Biggest Mistakes People Make When Timing Contractions

- ✦ Timing contractions too early and going in too soon — leading to being sent home.
- ✦ Timing every single contraction from the start. Instead, track for about 30 minutes, then go about your day — start timing again once you feel something in the pattern change.
- ✦ Forgetting that emotions are a key sign of labor progression — if you can still talk & joke, you're likely not in active labor yet.

✦ **Dawn's Tip:** *Trust the pattern over the panic. One long or short contraction doesn't mean much on its own — it's the trend over time that tells the real story.*

✦ **Dawn's #1 Tip:** *Rest as much as humanly possible in early labor — even though it's exciting. You don't know yet how long this will take, and the energy you save now is energy you'll want later.*

Want support through every stage? *A doula helps you know when it's really time, and stays with you through all three stages of labor.*

Work with Dawn: Visit mydouladawn.com to book a free 15-minute call.