

# Menstruation: Living with Your Menstrual Cycle

## What is menstruation?

Menstruation is a woman's monthly bleeding. It is also called menses, menstrual period, or period.

Menstrual blood is partly blood and partly tissue from the lining of the uterus. It comes from the inside of the uterus (womb). It flows from the uterus through the opening at the lower part of the uterus (the cervix). The blood flows from the cervix into the vagina and then out of the body. Sanitary pads or tampons are worn to absorb the blood.

## What is the menstrual cycle?

Menstruation is part of the menstrual cycle. The menstrual cycle helps your body get ready for the possibility of pregnancy each month. Each cycle starts on the first day of your period. The average menstrual cycle is 28 days long. However, a normal cycle can be shorter or longer than this. It may be anywhere from 21 to 35 days long.

Changes in body chemicals called hormones make the menstrual cycle happen. The ovaries make 2 important female hormones: estrogen and progesterone. Other hormones involved in the menstrual cycle are follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH) and luteinizing hormone (LH). FSH and LH are made by the pituitary gland in the brain.

In the first half of the menstrual cycle, levels of estrogen rise and make the lining of the uterus grow and thicken. In response to FSH, an egg (ovum) in one of the ovaries starts to mature. At about day 14 of a typical 28-day cycle, in response to an increase in LH, the egg leaves the ovary. This is called ovulation.

After ovulation, the egg travels through one of the fallopian tubes to the uterus. Progesterone levels rise and help prepare the uterus for pregnancy. If you have sex and the egg gets fertilized by a man's sperm and attaches to the inside of the uterus, you become pregnant. If the egg is not fertilized, it breaks apart. Hormone levels go down, and the thickened lining of the uterus is shed during the menstrual period.

## What is a typical menstrual period like?

Menstrual periods can actually vary a lot. Your period may not be the same every month, and it may not be the same as other women's periods. Periods can be light, moderate, or heavy. The length of the period can also vary. Most periods last 3 to 5 days, but anywhere from 2 to 7 days is normal. The amount of blood lost is usually only about 2 to 3 tablespoons.

Most women can tell their period is coming because their breasts feel tender and they have discomfort in their lower belly or pelvis. You may have sudden mood changes and bloating, tiredness, and headaches. You may have symptoms before, during, or after your period.

For the first few years after you start having periods, the periods may be very irregular. They may happen anywhere from once a month to 3 times a year. Periods may also be irregular as you near menopause during middle age.

## **How long does a woman have periods?**

Except when they are pregnant, women usually keep having periods until menopause. The average age of menopause is 51. Menopause means that you are no longer ovulating (releasing eggs) and therefore can no longer get pregnant. Like menstruation, menopause can be different from woman to woman. It may happen over several years. Some women have early menopause (before 40 years of age) because of surgery, illness, or other reasons.

## **What kinds of problems do women have with their periods?**

Some of the problems you may have with periods are pain, heavy bleeding, and skipped periods.

- Dysmenorrhea is the medical term for painful periods, including severe menstrual cramps. Sometimes a disease or condition, such as uterine fibroids or endometriosis, causes the pain. The treatment depends on what is causing the problem and how bad it is.
- Abnormal menstrual bleeding includes:
  - Very heavy bleeding (called menorrhagia)
  - Unusually long periods (also called menorrhagia)
  - Bleeding between periods (metrorrhagia)
  - Periods that are too close together (closer than 21 days apart)

In teens and women nearing menopause, hormone problems often cause abnormal menstrual bleeding. Other causes of abnormal bleeding include uterine fibroids and polyps. Treatment for abnormal bleeding depends on the cause.

- Not starting to menstruate by age 15 or not having a period for at least 90 days is called amenorrhea. Pregnancy stops periods. You also may stop having periods while you are breast-feeding. Other causes are extreme weight loss caused by serious illness, eating disorders, vigorous exercise, or stress. Hormonal problems or problems with the reproductive organs can also cause amenorrhea.

## **How can I take care of myself during my period?**

Change sanitary napkins (pads) before the pad is soaked with menstrual flow. Change tampons often--at least every 4 to 8 hours. Make sure that you use the lowest absorbency of tampon needed for your flow. For example, do not use super absorbency on the lightest day of your period. Using super absorbent tampons can put you at risk for toxic shock syndrome (TSS). TSS is a rare but potentially deadly disease. Using any kind of tampon increases your risk for TSS. You can lower your risk by not using tampons, or by switching between tampons and pads during your period.

Some of the things you can do if you have menstrual cramps are:

- Take ibuprofen, naproxen, aspirin, or acetaminophen.
  - Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medicines (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen, naproxen, and aspirin, may cause stomach bleeding and other problems. These risks increase with age. Read the label and take as directed. Unless recommended by your healthcare provider, do not take for more than 10 days for any reason.
  - Check with your healthcare provider before you give any medicine that contains aspirin or salicylates to a child or teen. This includes medicines like baby aspirin, some cold medicines, and Pepto-Bismol. Children and teens who take aspirin are at risk for a serious illness called Reye's syndrome.
- Put a heating pad set on low, or a covered hot water bottle, on your lower back or belly.
- Soak in a warm (not hot) tub.
- Gently massage your lower belly or lower back.

To learn more about menstruation, contact:

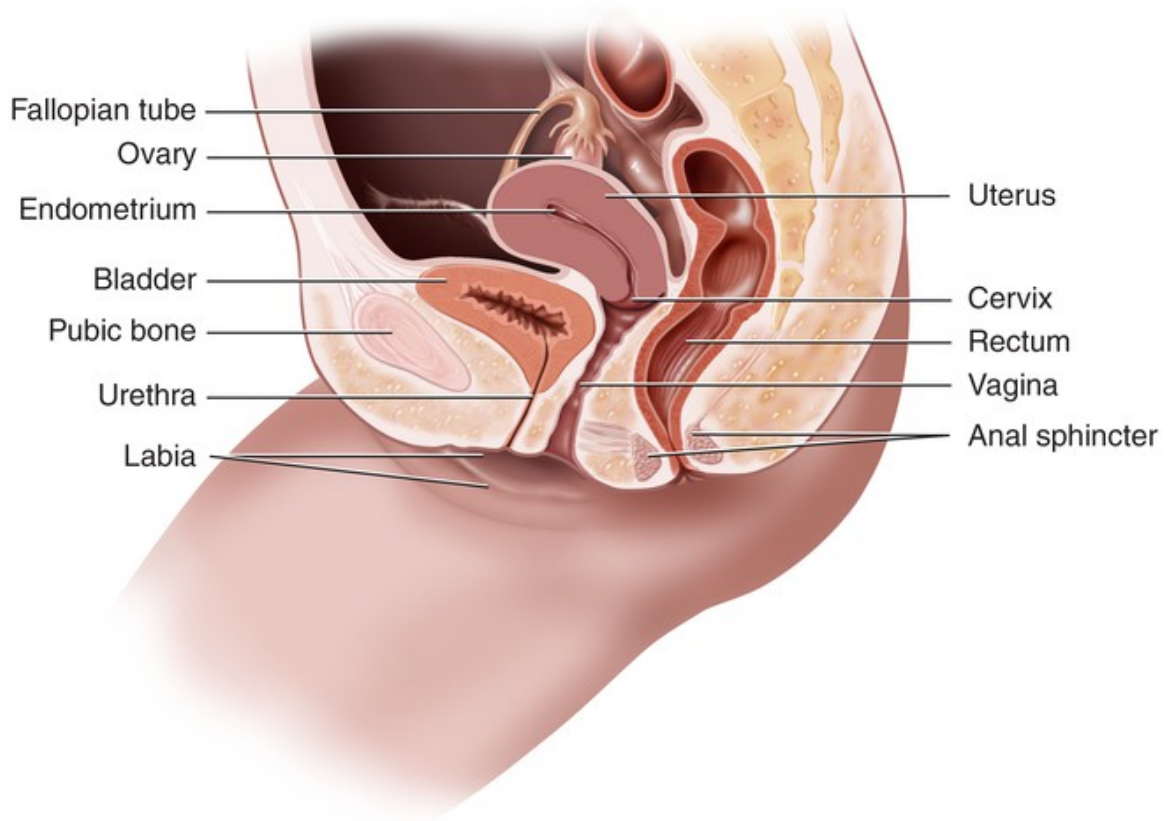
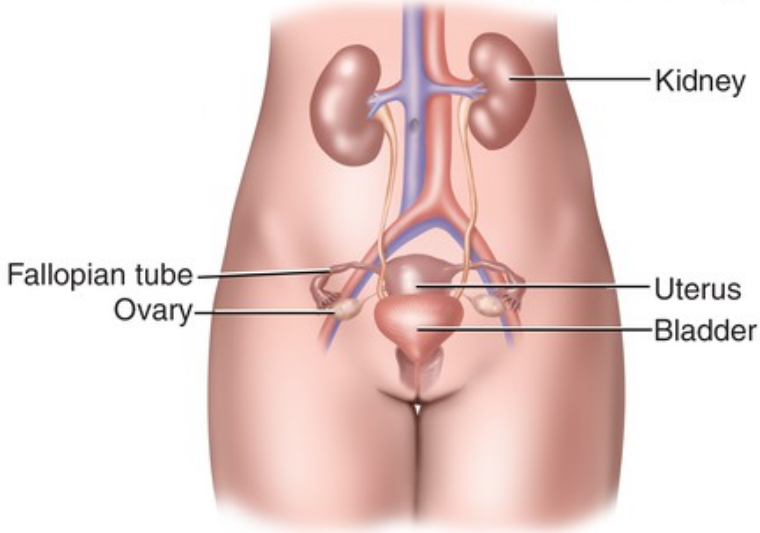
- The National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC)  
1-800-994-9662  
<http://www.womenshealth.gov>

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# Female Pelvis

(Female Pelvis)



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