

Top Questions About Your Menstrual Cycle

Menstruation is a woman's monthly bleeding, often called your "period." During your monthly menstrual cycle, your uterus lining builds up to prepare for pregnancy. If you do not get pregnant, your hormone levels (estrogen and progesterone) begin falling. Very low levels of estrogen and progesterone tell your body to begin menstruation. When you menstruate, your body discards the monthly buildup of the lining of your uterus (womb).

Q: How long is a typical menstrual cycle?

A: Your menstrual cycle is counted from the first day of your period up to the first day of your next period. The typical menstrual cycle is 28 days long, but each woman is different. Also, a woman's menstrual cycle length might be different from month to month.

Q: What is ovulation?

A: Ovulation is when the ovary releases an egg so it can be fertilized by a sperm to make a baby. A woman is most likely to get pregnant if she has sex without birth control in the three days before and up to the day of ovulation.

It may be difficult to know when you ovulate, but you can watch for signs. A few days before you ovulate, your vaginal mucus or discharge changes and becomes more slippery and clear. Some women feel minor cramping on one side of their pelvic area when they ovulate.

More than 90 percent of women say they get symptoms of premenstrual syndrome (PMS) in the time after ovulation and before their period starts.

Q: When should I see a doctor about a period problem?

A: See your doctor about your period if:

- You have gone three months without a period and are not pregnant, breastfeeding, or in perimenopause or menopause.
- You get irregular periods (your period happens more often than every 24 days or less often than every 38 days, or lasts longer than 8 days).
- You feel dizzy, lightheaded, weak, or tired, or you have chest pain or trouble breathing during or after your period.
- You bleed through one or more pads or tampons every one to two hours.
- You suddenly get a fever and feel sick after using tampons.
- You have menstrual pain that doesn't get better with over-the-counter pain medicine, such as ibuprofen or naproxen.
- You have period pain, cramps, or heavy bleeding that makes you miss work, school, or other daily activities.
- You get a migraine around your period or your regular migraine treatment stops working.
- You have blood clots in your menstrual flow that are larger than a quarter.
- You have bleeding after sex, more than once.

- You have spotting or bleeding any time in the menstrual cycle other than during your period.
- You have bleeding after menopause.

Q: How does my menstrual cycle affect my health?

A: Changing hormone levels throughout your menstrual cycle can cause health problems or make health problems worse:

- **Anemia.** Heavy menstrual bleeding is the most common cause of iron-deficiency anemia in women of childbearing age. Anemia is a condition that happens when your blood cannot carry enough oxygen to all of the different parts of your body because it does not have enough iron. This makes you pale or feel tired or weak.
- **Asthma.** Your asthma symptoms may be worse during some parts of your cycle.
- **Depression.** Women with a history of depression are more likely to have PMS or premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD). Symptoms of depression may be worse just before their periods.
- **Diabetes.** Women with irregular menstrual cycles, especially those longer than 40 days, have a higher risk for type 2 diabetes.
- **Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).** IBS causes cramping, bloating, and gas. Your IBS symptoms may get worse right before your period.
- **Problems getting pregnant.** Health problems, such as endometriosis, polycystic ovary syndrome, or underweight or obesity, can cause irregular periods. This can make it harder to get pregnant.

For more information...

For more information about the menstrual cycle, call the OWH Helpline at 800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
800-232-4636 • www.cdc.gov

Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development
800-370-2943 • www.nichd.nih.gov

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG)
800-673-8444 • www.acog.org

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