

MENSTRUATION & PERIODS

The menstrual period occurs when the uterus sheds its lining. It occurs approximately every 4 weeks (28 days).



Normal menstrual cycle

A normal cycle can last between 22 and 35 days, with 2-7 days of menstrual bleeding. The menstrual period is a mixture of blood, tissue and mucus. It exits the uterus through the cervix and then the vagina. Afterwards the lining in the uterus will start building up again, in preparation for a fertilised egg. Day 1 of the menstrual cycle is the day that the menstrual cycle starts.

What happens in a menstrual cycle?

In a 28-day cycle, days 1-14 are the follicular phase, and days 15-28 are the luteal phase. Hormones that are released from the pituitary gland in the brain help to regulate this cycle. They are called Follicular Stimulating Hormone (FSH) and Lutenising Hormone (LH).

In the follicular phase, follicles within the ovary are stimulated to grow, which contain eggs (ovum), and release oestrogen. Usually, one follicle becomes the biggest – this is called the dominant follicle. As the oestrogen levels get higher, lutenising hormone (LH) is triggered, which results in the release of the egg (ovulation). In a 28-day cycle, ovulation generally happens on day 14. The dominant follicle that released the egg (now called the corpus luteum) starts to release progesterone and oestrogen, and the body enters the luteal phase.

If a pregnancy occurs, these hormones help to support the growing pregnancy in its early stages. If no pregnancy occurs, the corpus luteum goes away, progesterone and oestrogen levels fall, and the menstrual period starts. At the same time, FSH levels start rising, which signals to the body to start the follicular phase again.

WHILE PERIODS CAN BE IRREGULAR AT TIMES, IF YOU DO HAVE A CHANGE FROM YOUR NORMAL CYCLE THAT LASTS FOR MORE THAN SIX MONTHS, IT IS A GOOD IDEA TO SEE A DOCTOR OR CLINICIAN.

Menstrual cycle

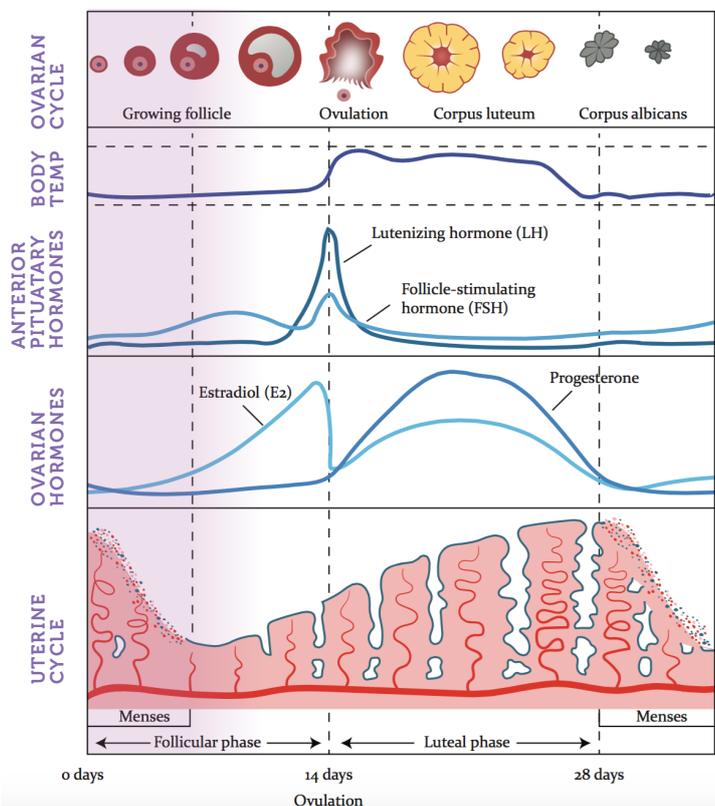


Image Source: Vios Fertility Institute

What changes are normal during the menstrual cycle?

It is normal to have changes to the body throughout the menstrual cycle. For example, vaginal discharge changes around ovulation and some people experience ovulation pain. Normal period symptoms include bloating, cramping, tender breasts and mood changes. Changes to a person's mood are also normal during the menstrual cycle.

Menstrual problems

Common period problems include:

- painful periods (dysmenorrhoea)
- heavy periods (menorrhagia)
- periods stopping (amenorrhoea)
- bleeding between periods
- irregular periods.

Painful periods

Dysmenorrhoea, or period pain, is common and can have a significant impact on wellbeing. Some women experience more severe pain than others. Period pain is usually experienced in the lower abdomen, lower back and tops of your legs. Painkillers such as non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (e.g. ibuprofen or naproxen), can ease the pain if it is troublesome. TENS machines can be useful. Other measures such as heat packs, a warm bath, or relaxation techniques can also help.

In most women the cause of period pain is not known. Sometimes it can be caused by endometriosis which is a condition of the reproductive organs where the tissue that lines the uterus grows outside of it. You should see a doctor if the pain impacts your daily activities.

Heavy periods

It is difficult to accurately measure blood loss during a period. Periods are considered heavy if there is a need to use double sanitary protection, if bedclothes are soaked, if large clots are passed, or if a person's lifestyle is restricted because of heavy bleeding. There are a number of causes of heavy periods. However, in many women, there is no abnormality of the uterus or hormones, and the cause is unclear. Regardless of the cause, there is treatment available to help with heavy periods.

Periods stopping

The medical word for no periods is amenorrhoea. The most common cause of amenorrhoea is pregnancy. While it is not uncommon to miss the occasional period, it is unusual to miss several periods if you are not pregnant. Other causes are stress, losing weight, exercising too much, menopause and premature ovarian insufficiency (early menopause). Some hormonal contraceptives cause amenorrhoea, which is a safe side effect and does not cause harm to the body. See a doctor if your periods stop for at least six months, or if your periods have not started by the age of 16.

Bleeding between periods

If you have bleeding between your regular periods, you should see a doctor. This includes bleeding during or after sexual intercourse or after menopause. One common cause of bleeding between periods is breakthrough bleeding, which is lighter bleeding that occurs in the first few months after starting the contraceptive pill. This usually settles over a few months. If ongoing bleeding is experienced on the contraceptive pill, you should see a doctor.

Irregular periods

Irregular periods are defined as cycles 21 days or less, or cycles longer than 35 days. If you are worried about irregular cycles, it is a good idea to keep a record of the length, heaviness and frequency of your periods. It is quite normal to have irregular periods for a few years after puberty and in the years leading up to menopause (perimenopause). During these times periods may change in length and heaviness. Lifestyle issues such as weight loss or gain, excessive exercise or stress can also cause irregular periods. Medical conditions such as polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) can cause irregular periods. See your doctor if you are worried about irregular periods.

Mood changes

Changes in mood during the menstrual cycle are normal. However, severe mood changes can be a sign of premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD), particularly if they happen right before a period. If you are worried that you have PMDD you should see a doctor.

When to see a doctor or clinician

You should seek medical advice if you experience a change in your regular bleeding patterns. This may include:

- heavier bleeding
- bleeding in between periods
- bleeding during or after sex
- increased abdominal pain
- migraines.

While vaginal bleeding between periods is not unusual, it should be checked by your doctor if it happens more than once or twice. Bleeding between periods can be caused by changes in hormonal levels, hormonal contraception or contraceptive devices, infection or injury.

It is common to experience heavy or irregular periods around menopause (perimenopause). It is a good idea to see your health provider to check that everything is okay and discuss possible treatment if symptoms are impacting on your quality of life.

Further information

[Menstrual Cycle Problems](#)

by Monash University

[Consumer Factsheet](#)

by The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care

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