

## Fact sheet

# Normal menstrual periods

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The menstrual cycle is the time between the first day of your period and the first day of your next period.

The average menstrual cycle lasts about 28 days. However it can vary a lot between women and even the same woman's periods can vary between cycles. The menstrual cycle can be as short as 24 day or as long as 35 and still be considered normal. Cycle lengths outside 24-35 days are more common at both ends of the reproductive years, that is, in young teens and also when women are approaching menopause.

Young women usually get their first period (called their menarche) between the ages of 9 and 15. The average age is about 12 years. When you get your first period it is a sign that your body has changed and you are now a woman who can have babies if she wishes.

Girls usually have symptoms of puberty, such as their breasts getting bigger and growing pubic and underarm hair, before their periods start. When your periods first start the cycle length can be very irregular (sometimes long, sometimes short) but this usually settles into a regular pattern after about a year.

Most women's periods stop around age 50, this ceasing of periods is called the menopause.

### What happens during my menstrual cycle?

The menstrual cycle is brought about by many changes of hormones that happen in your body each month. These cause the lining of the uterus (the endometrium) to thicken up and become ready to accept a fertilised egg if you fall pregnant. If you do not fall pregnant this thickened lining starts to break down at day 28 which causes the bleeding of a period.



Another important change that occurs during the cycle is that your ovaries prepare and then release an egg (called ovulation) during the middle of your cycle. This egg can be fertilised by a sperm if you have sex. The egg is usually released from the ovary between 12 and 16 days BEFORE your next period. The clock starts at ovulation. If you do not become pregnant, then a period comes 12-16 days later.

Fig 1.

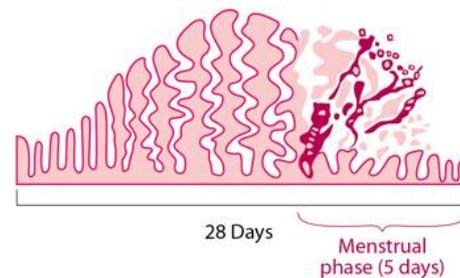
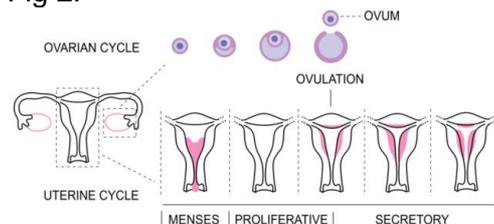


Fig 2.



Bleeding from a period is not usually heavy, only about 50mL, (a quarter of a cup) each month. Your body can easily cope with this blood loss. It is normal to see small clots or bits of 'tissue' or mucous with the blood. However, if you have heavy bleeding or are passing large clots you should speak with your GP about it.

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### What symptoms should I expect with a period?

Some women have no symptoms before their period but it is very common to experience some or all of the following:

- crampy lower abdominal (tummy) pain
- low back pain
- greasy hair and increased pimples during the few days before your period starts
- feeling tired, bloated and heavy
- having tender breasts
- feeling tense and irritable (these feelings are called premenstrual syndrome PMS).

These symptoms can range from very mild to quite distressing. They may sometimes interfere with your ability to work or go to school. If the symptoms are stopping you from doing your daily activities it is worthwhile talking about them with your GP.

For emotional symptoms, bloating and tiredness, increasing your exercise and eating healthy foods such as fruit and vegetables can be helpful.

If you are bothered by period pain, simple medications like ibuprofen will often make a big difference, especially if you take them regularly and start them when you feel your period coming or the day before it is due.

### What can I do to prepare for my periods starting?

Young women having their first period find it both an exciting time and an anxious one. Exciting because it is a sign of becoming a woman, and anxious because you don't know what to expect.

It is comforting to know that usually periods are not heavy nor painful in the first years after they start. It is also important to understand that if you have started your periods you are now fertile (able to fall pregnant) and so if you are having sex you must use contraception to prevent this. It is also recommended to always use condoms to protect yourself from sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

In the first year of having your periods the cycle is often irregular (varies in length) and many young women don't get pain before or during their periods. Because most young teenagers have no warning symptoms before their periods it can be helpful to be prepared in case your periods begin unexpectedly while you are out or at school. Keeping a small bag with a sanitary pad or tampon, some pain killers and spare underwear is worthwhile. Then you will not worry if your period begins unexpectedly.

### What about abnormal periods?

Facts sheets are available about

- Heavy periods
- Painful periods
- Irregular periods
- Bleeding in between periods (Inter-menstrual bleeding)
- Bleeding after menopause (Postmenopausal bleeding)

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as a way of continually improving our service.**

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### Acknowledgements

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