



The American College of
Obstetricians and Gynecologists



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

FAQ049

ESPECIALLY FOR TEENS

Menstruation

- **How does menstruation begin?**
- **How long is a menstrual cycle?**
- **What happens during the menstrual cycle?**
- **When does the first menstrual period occur?**
- **How can I keep track of my menstrual cycle?**
- **Should I use pads or tampons?**
- **How do pads work?**
- **What are panty liners?**
- **What are tampons?**
- **What symptoms can occur before a period?**
- **Is it normal to have pain during menstruation?**
- **When should I see a doctor about my cramps?**
- **What is amenorrhea?**
- **What can cause missed periods?**
- **Is heavy bleeding normal?**
- **Glossary**

How does menstruation begin?

As you mature, your brain signals your body to produce **hormones**. These hormones serve as messengers to trigger your menstrual cycle. A part of that cycle is the monthly period.

How long is a menstrual cycle?

An average menstrual cycle lasts 28–30 days, counting from the first day of one period to the first day of the next. Normal cycles can vary from 21 to 35 days.

What happens during the menstrual cycle?

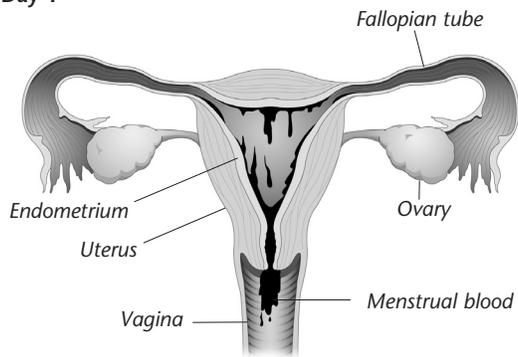
Each month, after day 5 of your cycle, the lining of the **uterus** (endometrium) begins to grow and thicken. If a woman becomes pregnant, that extra-thick lining helps to nourish the developing fetus (a baby growing in the woman's uterus).

Around cycle day 14, an egg is released from one of the **ovaries**. This is called **ovulation**. The egg moves into one of the two fallopian tubes connected to the **uterus**. If the egg is fertilized by a man's sperm, it moves into the uterus, where it attaches to the lining, and begins to grow into a fetus.

Around cycle day 28, if an egg is not fertilized, the endometrium is shed by bleeding. The menstrual blood (a mix of blood and tissue from the inside of the uterus) flows from the uterus through the **cervix** into the **vagina** and out of the body. This bleeding is the menstrual period. The menstrual period may last for 3–5 days. Some last as long as 7 days. The process then starts again in the next cycle.

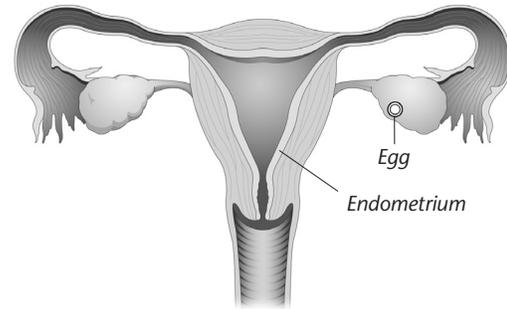
The Menstrual Cycle

Day 1



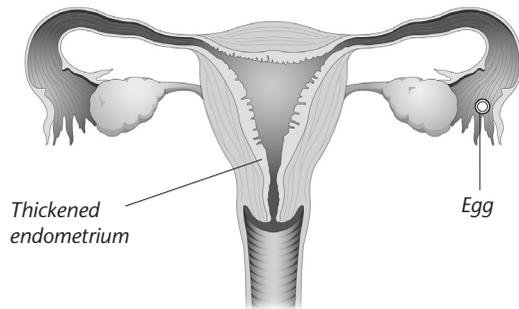
The first day of your menstrual period is considered day 1 of your cycle.

Day 5



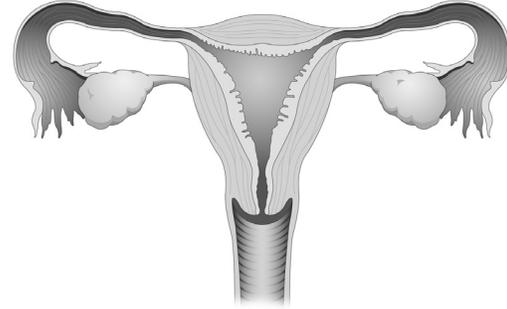
The hormone estrogen signals the endometrium to grow and thicken.

Day 14



An egg is released from the ovary and moves into one of the fallopian tubes.

Day 28



If the egg is not fertilized, hormone levels decrease, and the endometrium is shed during menstruation.

When does the first menstrual period occur?

Many girls have their first period around age 11 years or 12 years. But periods can begin as early as age 8 years or as late as age 16 years. The first period may be very light—only a few drops of blood or spotting may occur. Some girls have regular, monthly menstrual periods. Other girls might miss a period or have two periods in 1 month. This can be normal when a girl is first starting to menstruate. It can take some time for periods to become regular.

How can I keep track of my menstrual cycle?

It is a good idea to use a calendar to keep track of your periods. Mark the first day your period starts on your calendar with an "X." Count the first "X" as day 1. Keep counting the days until you have your next period. If you do this every month, you will be able to tell how many days there are between your periods. It will help you learn when your next period should start.

Should I use pads or tampons?

During your period, you can use pads, panty liners, or tampons to soak up the menstrual flow. You may want to use several of these products. Some girls like to use tampons on heavy-flow days, and pads or panty liners on lighter days. Some girls like to wear tampons during the day and pads at night. Some use products together.

How do pads work?

Pads are worn inside your underwear to collect your menstrual flow. Pads come in different sizes, styles, and thicknesses. Some have "wings" that fold under your underwear to provide better protection. Some are extra-thick for heavy flows. Some contain deodorant. Choose a pad based on your body size, the amount of flow, and what feels comfortable. Avoid pads with deodorant if they irritate your skin.

Most girls use pads when they have just started having periods. They should be changed about every 4–6 hours or whenever they seem full or begin to feel wet or uncomfortable. Some girls change their pads each time they urinate.

What are panty liners?

Panty liners are thinner and shorter than pads. Use panty liners for days when your flow is light, like at the end of your period. You also can use panty liners with tampons for extra protection.

What are tampons?

Tampons are worn inside the vagina to catch the flow as it leaves the body. Most come with plastic or cardboard applicators that are used to slide the tampon into your vagina. A short string attached to the end of the tampon hangs out of your vagina to let you remove it later.

Tampons come in different sizes and can absorb different amounts of blood flow. Look on the package to see how much the tampon will absorb.

Tampons should be changed after 4–6 hours. On the first days of your period, you may need to change them more often because your flow may be heavier.

What symptoms can occur before a period?

Some girls also go through physical or mood changes in the days or weeks before their menstrual periods start. The most common symptoms are:

- Bloating—a feeling of fullness in the abdomen
- Tender breasts
- Headache
- Feeling tired
- Mood swings
- Food cravings

Is it normal to have pain during menstruation?

Many girls have mild cramps in the lower abdomen or pain in the lower back when their periods start. Cramping gives you a feeling of tightness and pain. This is normal.

There are ways to relieve your cramps and other symptoms. You can

- take over-the-counter pain medicines, like ibuprofen, acetaminophen, or aspirin
- exercise
- place a heating pad or hot water bottle on your stomach

When should I see a doctor about my cramps?

If you have severe cramps, nausea, or pain so intense that you cannot do your usual activities during your period or pain medication does not help, see your doctor. Your doctor may be able to help relieve your symptoms. The first step is to note when the cramps or back pain occurs. Mark on a calendar when symptoms occur and when they are most severe. Show your calendar to your doctor and describe how you feel. Your doctor may want to do an exam or tests.

What is amenorrhea?

Some girls do not menstruate during their teenaged years. For instance, some girls' periods may never start or they may stop having periods completely. This is called amenorrhea. A young woman should see her doctor if she has not started having periods by age 15 years or if she has not had a period for 3 months.

What can cause missed periods?

There are many other reasons for a missed period. The most common reason is pregnancy. Other reasons you might miss your period include the following:

- Sudden change in weight
- Illness
- Stress
- Extreme exercise (such as running long distances each day)
- Hormone problems
- Taking certain medicines

Is heavy bleeding normal?

Some girls have heavier bleeding than others. If your periods are heavier than usual or go on for longer than a week, they may not be normal. In most cases, this is caused by problems with hormones. If bleeding occurs often or at the wrong time in your cycle, it could be a sign of a problem. See your doctor so that he or she can check for the cause of heavy bleeding.

Glossary

Cervix: The lower, narrow end of the uterus, which protrudes into the vagina.

Hormones: Substances produced by the body to control the functions of various organs.

Ovaries: Two glands, located on either side of the uterus, that contain the eggs released at ovulation and that produce hormones.

Ovulation: The release of an egg from one of the ovaries.

Uterus: A muscular organ located in the female pelvis that contains and nourishes the developing fetus during pregnancy.

Vagina: A tube-like structure surrounded by muscles leading from the uterus to the outside of the body.

If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.

FAQ049: Designed as an aid to patients, this document sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. The information does not dictate an exclusive course of treatment or procedure to be followed and should not be construed as excluding other acceptable methods of practice. Variations, taking into account the needs of the individual patient, resources, and limitations unique to institution or type of practice, may be appropriate.

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