

# Menstruation: The Period

## What is a period?

After a girl has gone through puberty she will start getting her period. A girl's first period can begin anytime between nine and 18 years of age. Everyone is different – you may start your period before or after your friends do.

### How it works

Ovulation happens each month when one or more eggs are released from the ovary. The egg will move through the fallopian tube, ending up in the uterus (also called the womb). Before the egg is released from the ovary, the uterus builds up a lining of extra blood and tissue. If the egg is fertilized by a sperm, it stays in the uterus and grows into a fetus (baby). The fetus will use the extra blood and tissue to keep it healthy and protected as it's developing.

When an egg doesn't get fertilized, the uterus no longer needs the extra blood and tissue – it leaves the body through the vagina. This is called a menstrual period. It is also known as *menses*. Getting a period lets a girl know puberty is progressing and the puberty hormones have been doing their job.

### The menstrual cycle

A menstrual cycle is the number of days from when one period starts until the next period starts. The average menstrual cycle is 28 days long. Cycles can

range anywhere from 21 to 35 days in adults and from 21 to 45 days for teens. A cycle can vary from month to month, and can be affected by many factors, such as: stress, diet, changes in weight and illness. For the first few years after menstruation begins, longer menstrual cycles are common. A woman's cycle tends to shorten and become more regular with age.

A period can last from two days to seven days. You can use pads or tampons during your period, or a combination of both. If you use tampons, it is important to choose the correct tampon (e.g., light, regular, super) according to how much you bleed. Always wash your hands before inserting a tampon, and do not leave a tampon in your vagina for more than six to eight hours. This will reduce your risk of a serious, but rare, bacterial infection called Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS).

A period is an indication you have started to ovulate and you can get pregnant if you are sexually active. If you are sexually active and miss a period you should see a nurse or doctor to find out if you are pregnant.

**1-800-361-5653**  
TTY: **1-866-252-9933**



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## Important things to know:

There are several hormones involved in regulating a menstrual cycle; the two main hormones are estrogen and progesterone. Changes in hormone levels during a cycle can cause some women/girls to experience some of the following changes:

- Enlargement and tenderness of the breasts
- Increased sensitivity around the nipples
- Cramps
- Nausea
- Fatigue
- Diarrhea
- Headache
- Bloating
- Mood swings – more emotional
- Increase in vaginal discharge that is clear/white and mucousy around 14 days before the next period comes – This can be a sign of ovulation

For most women/girls these changes are a minor disturbance, but if you are experiencing severe symptoms that interfere with your day to day activities, talk to your family doctor or call the *sexual health line*.



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