

FEMININE HYGIENE



Menstrual health and hygiene

Developing into a young woman and starting your periods is an exciting time, but it can sometimes be a little overwhelming. Arm yourself with the basic facts so you can feel prepared and confident.

Puberty, periods and the menstrual cycle

Puberty involves the normal physical changes that happen as a girl develops from a child into a young woman; it usually begins between ages 8 ½-10 and lasts about 4 years.¹

One of the most significant of these changes is getting your **period**, or menstruating, for the first time.¹

The menstrual cycle

Getting your period is just one part of the **menstrual cycle**, which the female reproductive system goes through each month:

The ovaries, the two female reproductive organs that produce the eggs³, release female hormones¹ (chemical messengers), which trigger two important processes:

- **The lining of the uterus (womb) thickens**, forming a soft, blood-rich cushion.
- **Ovulation**: one of the ovaries releases an egg, which travels to the uterus³.

If, during unprotected sex, the egg cell meets a sperm cell and fertilisation takes place (the egg and sperm fuse together), it attaches to the uterus lining where it develops into a baby³.

If no fertilisation occurs, the unused uterus lining breaks down and bleeds, and your body discards it via the vagina: this is **menstruation**³. It takes about 28 days for the lining to thicken and then break down, which is why a period happens once a month².

When will I get my first period?

Most girls get their first period at around 12 years, but it can be any time between ages 8-17 years. Everyone's different - don't worry if you start a bit earlier or later than your friends.⁴

Your body provides clues for when you'll have your first period:¹

- You're likely to menstruate for the first time about 2-3 years after your breasts start developing, which usually happens between ages 8-13.
- Shortly afterwards, hair starts growing in the armpits and genital area
- You get a growth spurt in height - this usually slows down once periods start.

Stayfree

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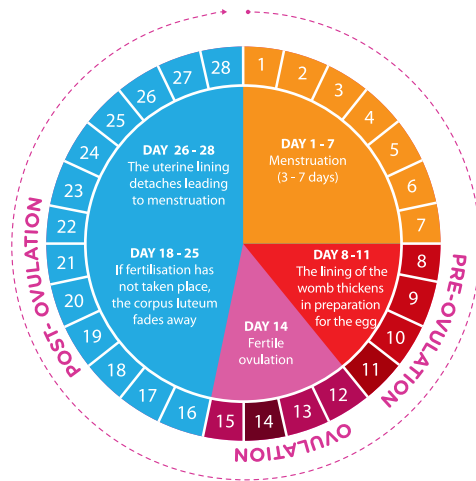
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How long is a period?

Periods typically continue for about 5 days, but can be shorter or longer - again, everyone is different. First periods often don't last very long.^{2,4}

Your periods may not come regularly at first; the body needs a few months to settle into a familiar pattern. It can take up to 5 years for the menstrual cycle to become regular^{1,4}. Once the pattern has settled, for most people there'll be a period every 23-35 days, which will last 3-7 days.⁴

It may seem that you bleed a lot when menstruating, but on average only about 1-5 tablespoons of blood are lost during the whole period. Although some women may bleed more heavily than this⁵, everyone is different.



The importance of menstrual hygiene

Menstrual hygiene refers to keeping clean throughout the menstrual cycle, staying healthy and feeling at your best⁷.

Period products

Period products to absorb menstrual flow are an important part of menstrual hygiene. There are many period products to choose from, and you may wish to try several options to find which suits you best.

Many girls use **sanitary pads**, especially when they first get their period, as some of the other products can take some getting used to. There are various sizes of pads with different absorbency levels for lighter or heavier flow throughout your period. One side of the pad is made of an absorbent material that soaks up the blood, and the underside of the product has an adhesive strip to attach securely to your underwear⁵.

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Panty liners, similar to pads but smaller and thinner, are a useful product to keep you feeling fresh and confident at all times. They can also be used to absorb everyday vaginal discharge. Vaginal discharge is the mucous liquid that passes naturally through the vagina, keeping it clean and lubricated. It changes in appearance during the month, but normally appears clear or whitish, and does not have an unpleasant odour.^{5,6}

Tampons are small tubes of cotton wool that you insert into your vagina to soak up the blood before it comes out of your body. There are 2 types of tampon – ones that come with an applicator and others without an applicator that you insert with your fingers. In both cases, there's a string at one end of the tampon, which you pull to remove it⁵.

Menstrual cups are an alternative to sanitary pads and tampons. The cup is made from silicone and you put it inside your vagina. Menstrual cups collect the blood rather than absorb it. Unlike tampons and most sanitary pads, which are thrown away after they've been used, you can wash menstrual cups and use them again⁵.

Finding the best product for you may take time, but it is worth experimenting with which product works best for you.

Menstrual hygiene tips:⁷

- Follow the instructions that come with menstrual products.
- Wash your hands before and after going to the toilet and handling a menstrual product.
- Discard used disposable menstrual products in a bin. Don't flush them down the toilet.
- Change your pad or other period product every few hours; more often during times of heavier flow. Don't wait until it's soaked through as this may lead to discomfort and leakage, as well as bacterial growth.
- Wear lightweight, breathable clothing e.g. cotton underwear. Tight fabrics can trap moisture and heat, encouraging germs.
- Keep your genital area clean. Wash your vulva (the external part of the female genitalia) and bottom every day; it's not necessary to wash inside the vagina (the internal part). When you go to the bathroom, wipe from the front of your body towards the back, not in the reverse direction. Using plain water is sufficient to clean the vulva.
- Use unscented toilet paper, tampons, or pads. Scented hygiene products may irritate the skin and impact your natural pH balance.
- Drink enough liquids. This can help wash out your urinary tract and help prevent infections, like vaginal candidiasis.

Managing period pain

Periods can be a pain: when the muscles of the uterus contract to discard the lining⁹, you'll typically feel an ache, or cramp. Take action so that period pain doesn't "cramp your style":²

- **Helpful heat:** place a hot water bottle over your abdomen².
- **Exercise** strengthens muscles in the pelvic region, which can help reduce cramps.
- **Medication:** Speak to your Pharmacist for pain relief treatments².

Period pain is common⁹, but while some people get it mildly, others experience it severely. Get advice from your pharmacist on pain relief, but if the cramping feels unmanageable then talk to your doctor.²

Managing PMS symptoms

Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS): this is how your body's hormonal levels change before your period, which may cause you emotional and physical changes⁵. As with period pain, different people experience PMS to varying degrees, from hardly noticeable to problematic².

Common PMS symptoms may include^{5,8,9}:

- Feeling irritable or moody.
- Breast tenderness
- Bloating
- Tiredness, trouble sleeping
- Spotty skin
- Headaches



These symptoms usually start and can worsen in the two weeks before your period; they tend to ease once your period starts.

Eating healthily, getting enough rest, exercising and managing stress all help with managing PMS symptoms.^{5,8,9}

When to see your doctor

It's a good idea to check in with your doctor if you're concerned about any aspect of your menstrual cycle, such as the following:^{2,4,5,9}

- You haven't started your period by age 16.
- Your periods stop or become irregular.
- Severe cramps that don't improve with over-the-counter medication, and interfere with everyday life.
- Very heavy bleeding or long periods, especially if this is unusual for you or it interferes with everyday life.
- Bleeding between periods.
- Severe PMS that interferes with normal activities.

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