

Living with your Periods

Menstrual periods are an important, if inconvenient, part of being a woman. They signal aspects of your health and the ability to become pregnant. Even though they are a normal part of being a woman, not everyone understands what makes them behave the way they do.



Why Periods Occur

During the years when you can become pregnant, generally from your early pre-teens to early 50s, your body prepares for a possible pregnancy roughly once a month. Through a complex system of hormones controlled by parts of your brain, the master pituitary gland and your ovaries, each month, one of the eggs stored in your ovaries becomes mature and is released. The lining of your uterus (womb) thickens to provide a resting place for the egg should it be fertilized by your partner's sperm. If fertilization does not occur, the process starts over again, with the lining of the uterus released (in the form of menstrual flow) so that it may start preparations all over again.



Puberty and Menopause

Puberty is a time of complex bodily changes that prepare a girl for the transition to womanhood and the possibility of pregnancy. Rapid growth, changes in body contours, and hormonal changes prepare the reproductive system for the periodic release of an egg and the possibility of pregnancy. Once established, these cycles of preparation and renewal continue until the 'change of life' known as menopause. As a woman approaches her late 40s to early 50s, her supply of eggs runs out and the monthly process of menstruation is lost along with her ability to conceive. This change may occur anytime from the early 40s to the late 50s with it occurring for most women about age 50.



When Periods Are Absent

Because the process that leads to cyclic menstruation is so complex, a number of things can cause menstruation to be absent or abnormal. Puberty may be delayed because of extremes of weight, activity, illness, genetics or other factors. Significant delays should be discussed with the girl's doctor to ensure that they are just normal variations and not something of concern.

The most common reason for previously established menstrual cycles to suddenly stop is pregnancy. Hormonal or other conditions can disrupt the processes of releasing an egg each month and a persistent absence of menstrual flow should prompt a doctor visit.



When Periods Are Heavy or Painful

Some degree of heaviness in the lower abdomen, mild cramping, back pain or other sensations are common during menstruation, but should not intrude on your daily life or activities. When periods are painful or heavy there are several simple things that your doctor or health provider can do, so you don't have to suffer. While menstruation is a part of being a woman, it should never be seen as a disability or something to be feared.