

# When Periods Are Heavy

---

Heavy or prolonged menstrual flow is technically referred to a *menorrhagia*. Ten percent to 15% of women experience excessive menstrual flow and about 1/3 of women will seek care for concerns about their flow. More than just an inconvenience, heavy flow can reduce a woman's blood stores or suggest the presence of health issues that require a doctor's care.

## Knowing if You Have Excessive Flow

Because menstrual fluid is a mixture of blood, cells that formed the lining of the uterus (womb) and other liquids, it is often difficult to know what is normal and what is not. The 'normal' amount of blood flow during a menstrual period is about 2 tablespoons, or 1 ounce. While the medical definition of heavy flow is almost 3 times this much, if you experience excessive soiling or numbers of menstrual hygiene products used, you may have heavier flow than normal.

## When Should I Be Checked?

While it is always appropriate to contact your health care provider anytime you are uncertain or have concerns, changing menstrual products more frequently than once an hour for several hours in a row, having flow that lasts more than 3-5 days or passing blood clots, would all suggest a check is appropriate. If you have to wear more than one pad at a time or have to change menstrual products during the night, you should check with your doctor.

## What the Doctor Will Check

Your doctor may check your blood stores by performing a complete blood count (from a sample from your arm) or an in-office assessment of your haemoglobin level (the oxygen-carrying iron that makes your blood red) from a drop of blood from your finger. Depending on your age, symptoms and other health needs, your provider may want to perform a simple pelvic examination to be sure that there are no problems with your uterus or ovaries. Sometimes, this evaluation will include the use of ultrasonography to 'see' inside your abdomen and get a better idea how your internal organs are doing. More involved tests are sometimes required and your doctor will discuss these if they are needed.

## What Can Be Done?

If no specific cause for heavy bleeding is apparent, medications that alter the menstrual bleeding process may be very effective. Medicines that alter the production of special signalling molecules, such as Motrin, Aleve and others may be effective, though they may require doses available only by prescription. Hormonal contraceptives, such as the pill, the medicated IUD or contraceptive shots, can alter your periods and result in lighter or absent bleeding. This option may be an excellent choice if you and your partner need contraception as well. This is a decision that you will want to discuss with both your partner and your health provider. In a small number of cases, more extensive treatments or procedures may be needed.