

Frequently Asked Questions

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## Puberty and Periods

### What is puberty?

**Puberty** is a time when your body begins to change to become more like an adult's. Starting your menstrual period is one of these changes.

### What is a menstrual period?

When puberty begins, your brain signals your body to produce **hormones**. Some of these hormones prepare your body each month for a possible pregnancy. This is called the menstrual cycle. Hormones cause the lining of the **uterus** to become thicker with extra blood and tissue. One of your **ovaries** then releases an **egg**. This is called **ovulation**. The egg moves down one of the two **fallopian tubes** toward the uterus.

If the egg is not fertilized with a man's **sperm**, pregnancy does not occur. The lining of the uterus breaks down and flows out of the body through your **vagina**. The release of blood and tissue from the lining of your uterus is your menstrual period (also called "your period").

### When will I start my period?

Most girls start their periods between the ages of 12 and 13, but some start earlier or later. Your period usually starts about 2 to 3 years after your breasts start to grow.

### How long do periods last?

When you first start having your period, it may last only a few days. Your first few periods may be very light. You may only see a few spots of reddish brown blood. Anywhere from 2 to 7 days is normal. If your period lasts for more than 7 days, you should talk with your doctor.

## How often will I get my period?

A menstrual cycle is counted from the first day of bleeding in one month to the first day of bleeding in the next month. The average menstrual cycle is about 28 days, but cycles that are 21 to 45 days are also normal. It may take 6 years or more after your period starts for your cycle to get regular.

## Why is it a good idea to track my period?

If you track your period every month, you may notice a pattern. It may become easier to tell when you will get your next period. To track your period on a calendar, mark the first day your bleeding starts on a calendar with an "X." Put an X on each of the following days that you have bleeding. Count the first "X" as day 1. Keep counting the days until you have your next period. There are also apps that can help you track your period.

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## Period Products

### What personal care products are available for me during my menstrual period?

Pads and period underwear are used to soak up the menstrual flow. Tampons and menstrual cups catch the flow from inside your vagina. Pads, period underwear, tampons, and menstrual cups can be used at different times. Some can also be used together.

### How are pads used?

Pads are worn inside your underwear to collect your menstrual flow. They come in different sizes, styles, and thicknesses. Some have extra material on the sides called "wings" that fold over the edges of your underwear to help keep the pad in place and give better protection.

A thinner, shorter version of a pad is called a "panty liner." Some girls wear panty liners on the last days of their periods when the flow is light or on days when they think their

periods will come.

Choose a pad based on your body size, the amount of flow, and what feels comfortable.

Pads with deodorant may irritate your skin.

## How often should I change my pad?

Change your pad at least every 4 to 8 hours or whenever it seems full or feels wet and uncomfortable. Some girls change their pads each time they urinate.

## What is period underwear?

Period underwear is a type of underwear that absorbs menstrual blood. The underwear has special material sewn into the fabric that soaks up the blood. There are different brands and styles of period underwear with options for heavier or lighter periods. Many styles feel and look like normal underwear.

Period underwear can be bought online and in some stores. They are sometimes called period panties.

## How long can I wear period underwear?

You can wear period underwear for a full day. But depending on the underwear and your flow, you may need to change your underwear more often. You can also wear a tampon, pad, or menstrual cup with period underwear for extra protection. Period underwear is washable, similar to normal underwear.

## How are tampons used?

Tampons absorb menstrual blood from inside the vagina. Some tampons have a plastic or cardboard applicator tube that helps slide the tampon in place. Some tampons do not have applicators and are inserted with just your fingers.

Follow the directions inside the box to learn how to insert a tampon. It should be comfortable to wear. Once it is inserted correctly, you should not feel it. A short string attached to the end of the tampon hangs out of your vagina to help you remove it later.

Tampons come in different sizes for heavier and lighter periods. The tampon package tells you how much fluid it can absorb. A "super" tampon, for example, is

thicker and is meant for heavy flow. A "slim" or "junior" tampon is slender and is meant for lighter flow.

## How often should I change my tampon?

You should change your tampon at least every 4 to 8 hours. Leaving a tampon in for a long time has been linked to [toxic shock syndrome](#). When your flow is heavier, you may need to change it more often.

## What are menstrual cups?

Menstrual cups are made of plastic or rubber. They are inserted into the vagina to catch the menstrual flow. You remove and empty the cup every 8 to 12 hours. Some cups are used only once and thrown away. Others can be washed and reused.

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## Possible Problems

### Does having a period cause pain or discomfort?

Some girls have a cramping pain in the lower abdomen or back or breast tenderness just before and during their periods. Others get headaches or feel dizzy. Some get nausea or diarrhea.

To help ease cramps, you can try the following:

- Take ibuprofen or naproxen sodium (if you do not have an allergy to aspirin or severe asthma). Always follow the directions on the bottle for how much to take.
- Exercise.
- Place a heating pad, heat wrap, or other source of heat on your belly or lower back.

If these problems do not go away after treatment or if you cannot go to school or do your normal activities, you should talk with your doctor. Read [Painful Periods](#) to learn more.

### What is amenorrhea?

[Amenorrhea](#) means not having a period. It is normal for some girls to not start their periods until age 16. But you should see your doctor if you have not started your period

by 15. You should also see your doctor if you have started your period but it then stops for more than 3 months. Read [Amenorrhea: Absence of Periods](#) to learn more.

Your doctor may ask questions or do tests to find out the cause of your amenorrhea. If you have had sex and you have missed your period, you should have a pregnancy test.

## What if I am having heavy bleeding?

If you are bleeding so much that you need to change your pad or tampon every 1 to 2 hours or if your period lasts for more than 7 days, you should see your doctor. See your doctor right away if you are light-headed, dizzy, or have a racing pulse. Read [Heavy and Abnormal Periods](#) to learn more.

## What if I have irregular periods?

You should tell your doctor if your periods are usually regular but then become irregular for several months. You should also see your doctor if your period comes more often than every 21 days or less often than every 45 days. Read [Heavy and Abnormal Periods](#) to learn more.

## When else should I talk with my doctor?

Menstrual periods are a normal, healthy part of life. But having a period should not interfere with your daily activities. If you have any questions or concerns about your period, talk them over with a parent or doctor.

## Glossary

**Amenorrhea:** The absence of menstrual periods in women of reproductive age.

**Egg:** The female reproductive cell made in and released from the ovaries. Also called the ovum.

**Fallopian Tubes:** Tubes through which an egg travels from the ovary to the uterus.

**Hormones:** Substances made in the body that control the function of cells or organs.

**Ovaries:** Organs in women that contain the eggs necessary to get pregnant and make important hormones, such as estrogen, progesterone, and testosterone.

**Ovulation:** The time when an ovary releases an egg.

**Puberty:** The stage of life when the reproductive organs start to function and other sex features develop. For women, this is the time when menstrual periods start and the breasts develop.

**Sperm:** A cell made in the male testicles that can fertilize a female egg.

**Toxic Shock Syndrome:** A severe illness caused by a bacterial infection. It can be caused by leaving a tampon in the vagina too long.

**Uterus:** A muscular organ in the female pelvis. During pregnancy, this organ holds and nourishes the fetus.

**Vagina:** A tube-like structure surrounded by muscles. The vagina leads from the uterus to the outside of the body.

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If you have further questions, contact your ob-gyn.

Don't have an ob-gyn? [Learn how to find a doctor near you.](#)

FAQ049

Last updated: June 2022

Last reviewed: October 2023

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