



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS  
FAQ049  
ESPECIALLY FOR TEENS

## Your First Period (Especially for Teens)

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### 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 years and 13 years, but some start earlier or later.

## 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.

## 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 21–45 days also are 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. Check online or on your smart phone for apps that can help you track your period.

## How can I track my period on a calendar?

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.

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

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

## How often should I change my pad?

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

## How are tampons used?

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. A short string attached to the end of the tampon hangs out of your vagina to help you remove it later.

## How do I choose a tampon?

Just like pads, tampons come in different sizes for heavier and lighter periods. The tampon package will tell you how much fluid it will 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 4–8 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 8–12 hours. Some cups are used only once and thrown away. Others can be washed and reused.

## 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 about how much to take.
- Exercise.
- Place a heating pad, heat wrap, or other source of heat on your abdomen 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 to your doctor.

## What is amenorrhea?

**Amenorrhea** means not having a period. It is normal for some girls not to start their periods until age 16 years. But you should see your doctor if you have not started your period by age 15 years. You also should see your doctor if you have started your period but it then stops for more than 3 months.

## What if I am having heavy bleeding?

If you are bleeding so much that you need to change your pad or tampon every 1–2 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.

## 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 also should see your doctor if your period comes more often than every 21 days or less often than every 45 days.

## 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 testes 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.

## If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.

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