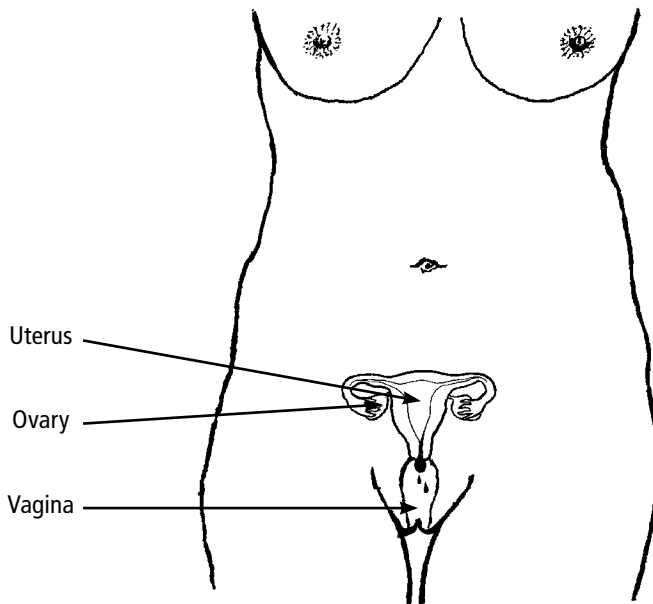


Women's Menstrual Cycles

A woman's normal monthly bleeding is called menstruation, or her period.

Menstrual blood comes from the lining inside the uterus (womb). As the monthly cycle begins, the lining of the uterus grows and thickens. If a woman becomes pregnant, the lining will be a soft place for the baby to grow. If she does not become pregnant, the lining is shed from inside the uterus and comes out of the vagina as the monthly bleeding.



A woman's ovaries release an egg once a month. If it is fertilized she may become pregnant. If not, her monthly bleeding will happen.

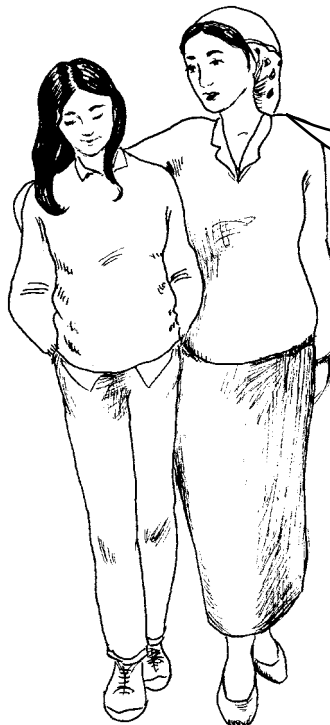
It is common to have some pain or cramping in the lower belly during menstruation. The changes in hormones that control the cycle of bleeding can also cause stronger emotions or sadness.

The First Menstruation

Girls start bleeding around age 12, some earlier, some later. For the first year, menstruation can be very short, happen on and off, or be spread out between several months. This is normal. After a few years bleeding usually becomes regular and happens about once a month.

Girls who were never told about menstruation often think something is wrong when their bleeding starts. Girls do better when they are told about it, and know what to expect.

Menstruation is a sign that a girl can become pregnant. But she can actually become pregnant a few months **before** her first menstruation, because her body starts releasing eggs first. (To learn about pregnancy and how to make it more likely or less likely to happen, see Family Planning – in development.) Even though a girl has the ability to get pregnant, it does not mean that pregnancy is safe for her, or that she is ready in other ways. Teach girls how pregnancy happens and about different family planning methods. Make sure family planning is available to girls.



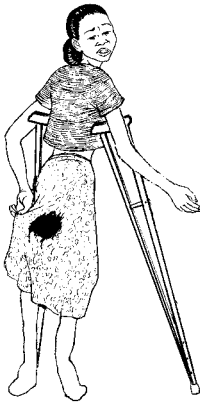
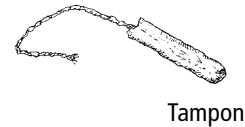
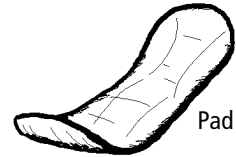
This means you are a woman now. I will show you how to use a cloth to stay clean. Then we will cook your favorite dinner tonight.

Every girl needs an adult she trusts or a health worker to talk with about how her body is developing.

Keeping clean during menstruation

Girls also do better when they are taught how to keep clean during menstruation. This helps prevent infection and helps her continue normal activities, like going to school. During your period:

- Use clean, dry cloths, sanitary napkins (pads), or tampons, and change them several times a day.
- Bathe every day and wash the genitals.
- Wash cloths with hot water and soap, and dry them in the sun if possible before using them again.



Some girls or women with disabilities may need extra help when they have their period.

True or false?

Different myths exist around the world about menstruation and the things a girl or woman should or should not do during her period. Some of these myths can be harmful and are often used to keep girls and women from taking active roles in their communities. Below are things that are true for all women.

Food: A woman does not need to avoid any certain foods during her period. If the food is healthy, it is also healthy and safe for her to eat during menstruation. If she has heavy bleeding, eating foods with iron (see page 8 of *Good Food Makes Good Health*) can help prevent anemia.

Exercise: A woman does not need to avoid normal activities or exercise while on her period. Exercising can even help to reduce any pain or cramping.

Bathing: A woman should not avoid bathing while menstruating. Keeping the genitals clean can help prevent infection.

Sex: A woman does not need to avoid sex while having her period. However, if one of the partners has HIV, the risk of infecting the other may be higher.

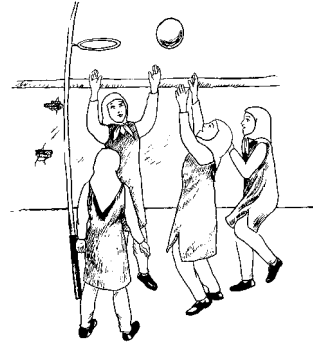
Concerns and Problems with Bleeding

Pain

Pain or cramps are common just before and during menstruation, and are not dangerous. Some women also feel tired, get mood changes, headaches or diarrhea. All of these are due to the changes in hormones around menstruation.

Treatment

- Take ibuprofen or another mild pain medicine.
- Rub or massage the lower belly.
- Fill a plastic bottle or other container with hot water, and place it on the lower belly or lower back. Or use a thick cloth soaked in hot water to warm the lower belly.
- Exercise or walk. Being active can help.



There are many local remedies and treatments for painful menstruation. If no remedy seems to be much help, you can also try using low dose birth control pills. Sometimes the additional hormones in birth control pills help lessen the pain. See Family Planning (in development).

For treating headaches, see Common Things People Feel When They Are Sick (in development).

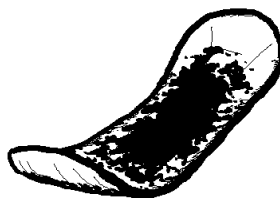
Pain in the lower belly when you are not bleeding is not normal. It can be caused by infection (see page 16 in *Belly Pain, Diarrhea, and Worms*), ectopic pregnancy (see page 10 of *Belly Pain, Diarrhea, and Worms*), cancer (see *Cancer* – in development), or some other problem. See a health worker.

Too much bleeding

Some women have very heavy bleeding, or menstruation that lasts more than a week. This blood loss can lead to anemia which weakens the body and makes you tired. For more on anemia, see page 8 in *Good Food Makes Good Health*. Eat plenty of iron-rich foods like meat, beans, eggs, and dark green vegetables. This helps replace the nutrients lost during menstruation. An iron supplement is also helpful (see page 38 in *Good Food Makes Good Health: Medicines*).

Get help if there are signs of too much blood loss (feeling weak, dizziness, pale skin).

Heavy menstrual bleeding can be a sign of small growths in the uterus, either fibroids or polyps. A pelvic exam by a trained health worker or an ultrasound test may be needed to find these growths. If fibroids or polyps are found and are causing problems, they can be removed from the uterus.



More than 2 pads full of blood in an hour is too much. Get help.

Women who have HIV and bleed too much are very likely to get anemia. Anemia is more dangerous for people with HIV. Taking ART and eating the iron-rich foods already mentioned will help prevent anemia.

If heavy menstruation is bothering you, birth control pills or injections may help. Talk with an experienced health worker.

The IUD, a birth control method, may cause heavier, more painful menstruation for some women. See Family Planning (in development).

Irregular bleeding

Regular bleeding is bleeding that starts once a month or so and lasts about 5 days. But there is a lot of variation: some women start bleeding about once every 35 days, some every 24 days. Some women have several months with no bleeding. Some have a few months with a shorter cycle, and then a few months with a longer cycle. All of this is usually normal and just another way that each person's body is different.

Birth control pills or injections can help make menstruation more regular.

Bleeding is rare or stops

Infrequent periods or a stop in bleeding can be caused by:

- Pregnancy. Always consider that pregnancy could be the cause – even if you are older, if you only had sex one time, if you are breastfeeding, or if you thought you could not get pregnant. A pregnancy test is the sure way to know if you are pregnant.
- Breastfeeding can stop menstruation for a few months.
- Some birth control pills or injections stop menstruation.
- Being young or old. It is normal and not harmful for young women and older women to have infrequent menstruation.
- Extreme stress, either emotional or physical. Menstruation should come back when things get better.
- Malnutrition. When a woman is too thin, her body stops menstruating.



Bleeding between menstrual periods

Some women have light bleeding between menstrual periods. If this happens once or twice, it is not likely to be a problem. If it keeps happening, it can be a sign an infection in the vagina, cervix, or uterus. For more on infections in the vagina, see *Genital Problems and Infections* (in development).

Bleeding between menstrual periods can also be a sign of small growths in the uterus – either fibroids or polyps. A pelvic exam by a trained health worker or a test called an ultrasound may be needed to find fibroids or polyps. For more on fibroids or polyps see *Where Women Have No Doctor*, also available from Hesperian Health Guides.

Bleeding between menstrual periods can also be a sign of cancer. For more on cancer in the cervix, see *Cancer* (in development).

Bleeding after sex is not normal. It can be caused by a sexually transmitted infection (see *Genital Problems and Infections* – in development) or cancer (see *Cancer* – in development). It can also happen after rough sex.

Bleeding during pregnancy is not normal. Early in pregnancy it can be a sign of losing the pregnancy (miscarriage). Later in pregnancy, it can be a very dangerous sign that the placenta is separating from the womb. This is an emergency and medical help is needed to prevent the woman from bleeding to death.



Menopause: The End of Menstruation

Women usually stop menstruating around age 50. Before menstruation stops completely, a woman's periods can become very irregular. A woman may go months between menstrual periods. Bleeding can become lighter or heavier. Long periods of heavy irregular bleeding around this time can be a sign of cancer of the lining of the uterus (endometrial cancer). See a health worker.

Other noticeable signs of menopause include changes in mood, sleep problems, and hot flashes that result from changing hormones inside the woman's body. All of these can be annoying, but for many women they lessen or go away within a few years.

Hormone Replacement Therapy

In the past, doctors recommended that women take medicines containing estrogen and progesterone to relieve the symptoms of menopause. This is called Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT). Now it is known that **HRT is not safe** and increases women's risk of breast cancer, heart disease, blood clots, and stroke.

The vagina gets dryer and smaller during menopause. Use a lubricant to make sex more comfortable and to avoid the small tears that can happen when the vagina is dry during sex. See Family Planning (in development) to learn more about lubricants.

Along with an end to bleeding, women stop releasing eggs during menopause, and so eventually can no longer become pregnant. But for as long as a year after bleeding stops, the body may still release eggs and a woman might still become pregnant months after menstruation stops.

Although in some countries women mourn the end of their body's ability to have children, many cultures see menopause as a transition when "wise women" become respected elders in the community.

