

YOUR MENSTRUATION, KNOW THE FACTS

Raksha Joshi MD

The menstrual period, or 'menstruation' or 'period' as it is commonly called, is the monthly indicator to each woman that she is not pregnant. The menstrual period is the time when the lining of the uterus (the womb) is shed, along with blood. Each month the uterus prepares a lining under the influence of hormones secreted by the ovaries, to sustain a pregnancy if an egg released by one of the ovaries gets fertilized. If the egg does not get fertilized, then the hormones decrease. This is an indication to the uterus to shed its lining, which is seen by the woman as a 'menstruation'. This is why, in legend, the menstrual period is known as 'the womb crying tears of blood' because all its preparations for a pregnancy were wasted.

A 'normal' menstrual period occurs in a regular fashion approximately every 28 days or each lunar (moon) month. The interval between menstruations from the first day of one to the first day of the next, may vary between 21 days to 35 days. Both these patterns are normal. In each calendar year, most women will have 13 menstrual periods. The duration of bleeding during each menstruation may be from 2 to 7 days.

It is of utmost importance to know that each menstrual 'cycle' must be counted from the first day (beginning of bleeding) to the first day of the next menstruation. For example if you began your menstruation on January 1, this is 'day 1' of one menstrual cycle. If you then begin menstruation on January 29, then this is 'day 1' of the next menstrual cycle. It does not mean that you had two menstruations in January. In this case, the 'menstrual cycle' was 28 days (January 1 to Jan 28). **Do not count** your menstrual cycle from the end of one bleeding to the beginning of the next menstrual bleeding. This is a very common cause of confusion among women. If you tell your doctor or care provider that you are suffering from 'frequent' periods, but are counting from the end of one period to the beginning of the next, and the physician/care provider does not clarify with you (as is often the case), how you are counting, this could create a lot of unnecessary anxiety and intervention which may not be required.

As a woman reaches the 'perimenopause' (the years before menopause, which can be upto 7 years), the interval between menstruations may become shorter. Menstruation may be irregular for a few years after the first menstruation, because the system of organs which regulate menstruation is in the process of maturing.

When should you see a doctor about your period?

1. If you have no menses by age 16 years, even though your breasts have developed.
2. If you have no menses by age 13 years, and your breasts have not developed.
3. If you have not had a period for a month after having regular periods for some time.
4. Irregular periods
5. Heavy bleeding requiring more than one pad per hour for several hours.
6. Periods that lasts longer than 7 days.
7. Severe pain during periods that is not relieved by simple pain medications.
8. Any bleeding in between regular periods.
9. If you use tampons and, have fever, rash, sore throat, diarrhea, dizziness or fainting.
10. If you have attained menopause (complete cessation of menstruation for one year or more), and you then experience bleeding from the vagina.

It is of utmost importance that even if your menstruation is regular every month, you keep exact record of the date when each menstruation began. You may use your pocket diary for this, or mark it on a calendar at home. Whenever you go to your doctor for a gynecology visit, always take your 'menstrual calendar' with you so you can provide accurate answers to the questions that your physician will ask you.

If you have any questions feel free to speak with your physician.