

What Your Menstrual Cycle Can Tell You About Your Health

Tracking your menstrual cycle is more important than ever. Knowing whether you are regular or irregular can help you understand a great deal about your health.

Patients of all ages need to pay close attention to when their last period began, its duration, and the amount. Keeping track of your menstrual cycles can help you gauge what's normal for you, time ovulation and identify a missed period or unpredictable menstrual bleeding. While menstrual cycle irregularities usually are not serious, sometimes they can signal health problems which should be addressed.

As you know, the menstrual cycle is the monthly series of changes a woman's body goes through in preparation for the possibility of pregnancy. Each month, ovulation releases an egg from the ovary while simultaneously hormonal changes prepare the uterus for pregnancy. If the egg is not fertilized, the lining of the uterus sheds through the vagina as a menstrual period. The menstrual cycle, which is counted from the first day of one period to the first day of the next, is not the same for every woman. Menstrual flow might occur every 21 to 35 days and last two to even seven days with varying degrees of flow. For the first few years after menstruation begins, long cycles are common. However, menstrual cycles tend to shorten and become more regular as you age. Your menstrual cycle might be regular, the same length every month, somewhat irregular, and your period might be light or heavy, painful or pain-free, long or short, and still be considered normal. Within a normal range is what's normal for you. That is very important to know. And, no one knows your body better than you. For example, if you experience an unusually heavy period for a prolonged period of time, you may develop an iron deficiency or anemia which must be treated with iron supplements and dietary changes.

To determine what's normal for you, we encourage you to start keeping a record of your menstrual cycle on a calendar or a smart phone app. Begin by tracking your start date every month for several months in a row to identify the regularity or patterns of your periods. If you're concerned about your periods, then also make note of the following every month:

- **End date.** How long does your period typically last and is it longer or shorter than usual?
- **Flow.** Is it lighter or heavier than usual?
- **Abnormal bleeding.** Do you bleed in between periods?

- **Pain.** Is pain associated with your period?
- **Other changes.** Do you experience any changes in mood, behavior or normal activity?

What can cause your menstrual cycle to be irregular?

Menstrual cycle irregularities can have many different causes, including:

- **Pregnancy:** A delayed or missed period can be an early sign of pregnancy.
- **Breast-feeding:** Breast-feeding typically delays the return of menstruation after pregnancy.
- **Eating disorders:** Anorexia nervosa and bulimia cause missed periods.
- **Extreme weight loss or excessive exercising:** May disrupt menstruation.
- **Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS):** Hormonal disruption and cystic ovaries causes irregular periods.
- **Premature ovarian failure:** Primary ovarian insufficiency with loss of ovarian hormone secretion before the age of 40 results in irregular menses.
- **Pelvic inflammatory disease (PID):** Reproductive organs inflammation can cause irregular menstrual bleeding.
- **Uterine fibroids:** They cause heavy menstrual periods, pain and bleeding between periods.

Can irregular cycles be regulated?

Birth control pills can help regulate menstrual cycles. However, some menstrual irregularities cannot be prevented. Regular gynecologic exams can help ensure that problems affecting your reproductive organs are diagnosed and treated as soon as possible.

Consult your OB/GYN if...

- Your periods suddenly stop, but you're not pregnant
- Your periods become erratic after having been regular
- You bleed for more than seven days
- You bleed more heavily than usual

- Your cycle is less than 21 days or more than 35 days apart
- You bleed between periods
- You develop severe pain during your period

Your menstrual cycle is actually one of the best predictors of overall health. Take a proactive role in your health and maintain a record of your menstrual cycle and symptoms. If you have questions or concerns about your menstrual cycle, make an appointment to discuss these with your OB/GYN.