

# QUICKIES: **periods and the menstrual cycle** a sex ed summary from [scarleteen.com](http://scarleteen.com)

In order to have a menstrual period -- a cyclical shedding of the uterine lining that comes through the vagina -- someone first has to have a uterus, can't be pregnant, and has to have all the specific hormonal things happening that create a menstrual cycle and periods. The menstrual cycle is a term that describes a hormonal cycle that starts with a period and goes on, through different phases, until the next one. It takes 28 days on average, but many people have cycles that are shorter or longer.

## The menstrual cycle has three phases:

**1) Menstrual:** The start of a menstrual period is day one of the cycle. Periods happen because the uterus sheds lining it made ready in the last cycle in case an ovum (egg) was fertilized. Periods usually last about three to seven days. The flow of a period is a combination of uterine tissue, cells from the lining of the vagina, bacteria, vaginal discharges *and* blood. It varies in volume and color. Cramps are common during a period, but most people can manage them with analgesics like ibuprofen or naproxen, heat, rest and stretching.

**2) Proliferative:** The hormone estrogen increases during this phase. It tells the body to get the lining of the uterus ready in case it needs to support a fertilized egg in this cycle. Ovulation -- where an egg is released from the ovary so that it can possibly be fertilized -- usually happens during this phase. Vaginal discharge becomes thinner.

**3) Secretory:** During this phase, the hormone progesterone increases. It tells the body not to release any more eggs during this cycle. Unless an egg was fertilized, progesterone will increase until a period starts and then it'll drop to a very low level. Vaginal secretions are thicker and pastier. The vagina feels drier than usual.

It usually takes a few years for a menstrual cycle to become "regular": to be about the same number of days, give or take, every cycle. People with "regular" cycles can still have occasional variations with that timing, or changes in things like how long flow happens for, or how light or heavy it is on a given day. Not everyone has, or always has, regular menstrual cycles. Throughout the time of life people have periods -- typically for around 40 years -- they will experience changes with them sometimes: changes are common and don't always mean something is wrong.

People sometimes skip periods. They can also come later than expected. That can happen because of pregnancy, but for other reasons, too, like illness, unmanaged stress, hormonal or body composition changes, eating disorders, exercise, birth control use and more. Someone missing periods who doesn't know why should see a healthcare provider. Some people

experience very painful periods, very heavy flow, or other big symptoms before or with their periods that are difficult to manage. Those are also good reasons to see a healthcare provider.

Unless a person uses something to manage their flow, periods will stain and go through clothes, or pool in underpants, which doesn't feel good. There are a few options for managing menstrual flow.

**Pads:** Pads are worn inside underwear and absorb flow. You change them when they're getting full or when you just want to. They're often the best choice for someone new to periods, for heavy flow, or during sleep. There are disposable pads and washable pads. Washable pads can be worn many times, are better for the environment, often more comfortable, and cost less long-term. You wash and dry them for reuse, just like underwear. Washable pads can be bought online and in some in-person stores, including some grocery stores. Disposable pads are for one-time use and can be found online and at grocery stores, pharmacies, and superstores.

**Insertables:** These are ways to manage periods that are inserted into the vagina to catch or absorb flow. They're good for swimming, sports, special occasions, or for people who don't like pads.

- **Tampons:** These are the most common insertable. People can get them at pharmacies, grocery stores, superstores, or online. Tampons are safe to use so long as people using them follow the directions. One risk tampons pose is of Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS). TSS is rare, but serious. It can cause severe medical problems. To prevent TSS, people using tampons should change them often, only use them during the day, and use 100% cotton tampons, without bleaches or synthetic materials.
- **Sea sponges:** These are small natural, recyclable, reusable sponges. They are used to absorb periods by wetting them, squeezing the water out, and sliding them into the vagina. They should be changed often. People can reuse them by taking them out, squeezing out the flow inside, then boiling and drying them. They are a good option for people who want an insertable but don't like tampons or menstrual cups or have a hard time using them. You can usually find them at health food stores or pharmacies.
- **Menstrual cups:** These are flexible silicone, latex, thermoplastic elastomer or rubber cups that are inserted into the vagina and catch flow. They can be reused for many years and can be worn for 12 hours at a time. They cost less long-term than tampons or sponges. You can find cups online, in natural food stores, and in some grocery or superstores.

It's best to avoid scented pads or tampons: they can irritate the vagina or vulva.

Everyone feels differently about periods, depending on things like their culture, family, and gender. You should know that there's nothing gross or bad or wrong about periods. They're just something bodies do, like breathing, eating or peeing.

**This handout was prepared by Sam Wall and Heather Corinna and is a summary of On the Rag: A Guide to Menstruation ([https://www.scarleteen.com/article/bodies/on\\_the\\_rag\\_a\\_guide\\_to\\_menstruation](https://www.scarleteen.com/article/bodies/on_the_rag_a_guide_to_menstruation)) by Heather Corinna. © 1998 - 2019 Scarleteen/Heather Corinna. All Rights Reserved.**