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## Starting Menstruation

Menstruation is the natural flow of blood from a woman's body that happens once a month. When a girl gets her period for the first time, it signals that she has become physically able to have a baby. Most girls start their periods between 12 and 13 years of age, but some may start as early as nine years old or as late as 16.

Before the start of menstruation, a young girl's body begins to change. Her hips begin to widen and she begins to grow breasts. She also grows taller. Hair begins to grow in the armpits, as well as in the pubic area. These changes usually begin about two years before the first period starts.

After getting her first period, a girl may continue to grow taller for about two years, usually about two or three more inches. These changes are all part of the process of changing from a girl to a woman.

Now, let's discuss why menstruation occurs.

Female reproductive organs consist of the uterus, two ovaries (one on each side of the uterus), two fallopian tubes (which connect the ovaries and the uterus), and the vagina. The uterus is above the vagina, which is the canal that leads to the outside of the body.

Every month, an egg is released from one of the ovaries, and it travels down a fallopian tube to the uterus. If sexual intercourse with a male has occurred without using a condom (or other barrier method of contraception), sperm from the male will migrate from the vagina toward the fallopian tubes. Once the sperm meet the egg, they will attempt to break through its outer wall. Only one sperm, however, will succeed, and the resulting union will begin the developmental process of becoming a baby.

In preparing for a baby, the lining of the uterus will thicken each month so that it will be able to nourish a growing baby. However, if the egg is not fertilized it cannot develop any further, so the thick, nourishing lining of the uterus is not needed. In this case, the uterus begins to shed its lining along with some blood. This material flows out of the uterus through the vagina—creating the menstrual flow. Most women use tampons or pads to manage the flow.

For the first couple of years, menstrual periods may be irregular—meaning that they may not occur at the same time every month. For this reason, they may be hard to accurately predict. After that, a predictable pattern is usually established. Most women get their period every 21 to 35 days, and the length of time most women bleed can be from three to seven days. On the days of heaviest bleeding, a woman typically needs to use about four to five pads or tampons per day, and they should be changed at least every six to eight hours—depending on how heavy the bleeding is.

Many women suffer from cramping that can occur during this time. Symptoms might include mild to severe cramping in the lower abdomen, back, or thighs; headaches; and nausea. You can help lessen menstrual cramps by getting regular exercise, and you can treat the pain with over-the-counter medications, such as ibuprofen or naproxen. Heating pads or hot water bottles, or taking hot baths, may also help.

If your cramps don't respond to home treatment, or if they don't stop when your period stops, call your doctor or health care professional. You should also call if your menstrual bleeding is very heavy or lasts longer than ten days, or if your periods occur more frequently than every 21 days. Finally, call if your period is accompanied by sudden high fever, diarrhea, or a skin rash, or if the cramps don't seem to be related to your menstrual cycle at all.



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