

Periods A to Z

Adenomyosis

A condition of the reproductive system which causes the uterus to thicken and enlarge. Endometrial tissue lines the inside of the endometrium or womb lining. Adenomyosis occurs when this tissue grows into the myometrium, the outer muscular walls of the uterus.

Amenorrhoea

Absence or lack of menstruation

Anovulation

Absence of ovulation

Anovulatory cycle

A menstrual cycle during which no egg is released

Cervix

The connection between the uterus and the vagina. The narrow opening protects the uterus from germs.

Cloth pad

Reusable pads are worn during menstruation to absorb menstrual blood outside the body. They are washed after use and reused. They are a more environmentally friendly version of disposable pads.

Cervical Mucus

A milky-white or clear secretion that flows from the vagina. It is made up of cells and water and is a natural part of a healthy menstrual cycle. Colour and consistency of the mucus change across the cycle.

Cervical Screening

This test is used to detect cervical cancer.

Cis-women or Cis-men

People who identify to the gender to which they were assigned at birth.

Cycle apps

Apps that help you observe your cycle pattern.

Cycle length

From the first day of menstruation to the day before the menstruation starts again is your cycle length and generally it lasts from 25 to 34 days but this varies.

Cycle Phases

There are 2 phases. The first half is called the Follicular Phase (between the start of menstruation and the next ovulation) and the second, Luteal Phase (between ovulation and the next period).

Dysmenorrhoea

Painful periods usually involving cramps and abdominal pain

Egg

Sex cell containing all the genetic material that is passed onto children. At puberty an egg matures in the ovaries during each period. Eggs can be fertilised for up to 24 hours.

Estrogen

Sex hormones mainly produced in the ovaries. Promotes the maturation of eggs and ensures blood flow in the lining of the womb or uterus. Estrogen levels fluctuate during the menstrual cycle.

Endometriosis

A chronic, extremely painful condition in which the lining of the womb grows outside the uterus. The cause is unknown and treatments are limited.

Fertility

Ability to get pregnant and give birth to offspring.

First period

The first menstrual bleed. Also called the Menarche – this is the beginning of your periods.

Follicular phase

The first phase of the menstrual cycle. Follicle stimulating hormone (FSH) increases and enables ovulation.

Gynaecologist

Specialist in gynaecology and obstetrics

Hormones

Chemical messengers produced by glands in our bodies and transported in our blood. They regulate several processes in our body.

Hormonal Contraception

These include the pill, the patch and Intra Uterine device or coil. See the contraceptive leaflet for full details. Aim is to prevent pregnancy or sometimes they are used to treat menstrual disorders. They do not protect against sexually transmitted diseases.

Infertility

Infertility is defined as inability to conceive despite trying for at least one year of regular unprotected intercourse.

Irregular cycle

Menstrual cycles that last less than 24 days or more than 35 days. Also includes cycles that vary by more than 8 days from cycle to cycle.

Luteal phase

Second phase of the menstrual cycle starting at ovulation and ending when your period starts.

Menopause

Twelve months of no periods. Menopause is a part of aging and the UK average is 51 years old however 1 in 100 women go through menopause early and many without knowing the cause.

Menorrhagia

Abnormally heavy periods.

Menstrual problems

This can include symptoms like premenstrual tension before your period and cramps, headaches, breast tenderness and fatigue etc.

Menstrual Blood

Menstrual blood is actually a mixture of blood, womb lining, the unfertilized egg and vaginal mucus.

Menstrual Cup

Small reusable containers that collect menstrual blood inside the body. They are inserted into the vagina and are usually made of silicone.

Menstrual irregularities

This can be periods that are too frequent or too infrequent, too heavy or too light.

Menstrual cycle

Begins on day 1 of your period and ends with the day before the next period. Usually lasting between 25 and 34 days and reoccurring monthly. Most people have about 400 periods in their lifetime but this varies.

Menstruation

Shedding of the lining of the womb which is discharged along with some blood – usually lasts on average about 5 days. Also called a period or bleeding.

Menstruating people

Term for all people who experience menstruation. Not all women menstruate and not everyone who menstruates identifies as a woman.

Non-binary

People whose gender identity lies outside the binary gender system and who identify as neither male or female.

Ovaries

Ovaries are where eggs and sex hormones are produced

Ovulation

This is when the unfertilised egg is released from the ovary into the fallopian tube. Ovulation normally takes place periodically mid cycle. Fertility peaks around ovulation.

Oligomenorrhea

Infrequent periods. So the menstrual cycle is too long eg. More than 35 days (maximum 90). Usually occurs around the time of first period or before menopause when it would be considered normal but should be investigated. Often a sign of PCOS.

Ovarian cyst

Sack like cavity in or on the ovaries and filled with fluid. Size varies. In PCOS the cysts are not actual cysts but immature egg follicles that didn't develop properly.

Ovulation bleeding

Intermittent bleeding occurring at time of ovulation/mid cycle.

Pad

Can be disposable or washable cloth pads for wearing in underwear to absorb menstrual blood.

Pill

Hormonal contraception. Various types – please see our leaflet on contraception.

Period

See Menstruation

Puberty

Development that takes place during adolescence – increased sex hormones are produced which leads to functioning of the reproductive organs.

Perimenopause

Usually occurs one to two years before menopause and is often the most problematic time of menopausal transition as hormones are fluctuating.

Period poverty

Period poverty is when people who menstruate cannot afford to buy period pads, tampons, menstrual cups etc. This can have health consequences and is why many societies are now advocating for free period products.

Period underwear

Underwear that includes a washable sewn-in pad to collect blood during your period. Reusable.

PCOS

Hormonal metabolic disorder and most common cause of infertility.

Pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS) & Pre-menstrual mood disorder (PMDD)

PMS is associated with pain, low mood and headaches a few days before your period. PMDD is a more severe cyclical, hormone-based mood disorder. Symptoms usually begin in the premenstrual or luteal phase of your cycle and subside when your period begins. Symptoms of PMDD include mood swings, depression, anxiety, difficulty concentrating, fatigue, bloating and breast tenderness.

Progesterone

It promotes the growth of the uterine lining in preparation for a fertilised egg.

Spotting

Light bleeding – sometimes a brownish colour which can occur between periods – usually worth speaking to your Dr about.

Tampons

Inserted into the vagina to absorb menstrual blood inside the body.

Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS)

A potentially life-threatening condition, usually caused by bacteria and has been linked to using tampons. Symptoms can include high temperature, headache, aching body, sore throat, cough, nausea, diarrhoea, sunburn like rash, lips – tongue and whites of eyes turning bright red, dizziness or fainting, difficulty breathing and confusion – TSS is a medical emergency.

Transgender

People who do not identify with the sex to which they were assigned at birth.

Uterus

Another name for the womb, an upside-down pear shaped organ in which the egg nests and develops after fertilisation.

Uterine lining

Protects the womb and enables the implantation of a fertilised egg. During menstruation, the upper layer is shed. During pregnancy it is referred to as decidua and is shed with the afterbirth.

Vulva

The entire external sexual organs including the mons pubis, the labia, the urethral opening, the vaginal vestibule and the clitoris. Often mistakenly called the vagina.

Vagina

The main sex organ which connects the cervix and vaginal vestibule. Protects the sexual organs that lie deep in the body.

Vaginismus

Sexual dysfunction or pain disorder which occurs with involuntary tension of the pelvic floor and outer third of the vaginal muscles which causes the vaginal entrance to narrow. Makes vaginal intercourse and gynaecological examinations painful/impossible.

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