

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

A menstrual *period* is the shedding of the lining of the uterus. The shedding comes through the vagina. To have a menstrual period, someone first has to have a uterus and can't be pregnant. There are specific hormonal things that have to happen to create a menstrual period. The menstrual *cycle* is the term that describes the hormonal cycle. The cycle begins with a period and goes on, through different phases, until the next period. 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 first day of the cycle. Periods happen because the uterus sheds its lining. This lining was made during 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. 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. Ovulation is when an egg is released from the ovary so that it can possibly be fertilized. This usually happens during the proliferative phase. Vaginal discharge becomes thinner.

**3) Secretory:** During this phase, the hormone progesterone increases. It tells the body to stop releasing eggs during this cycle. Unless an egg was fertilized, progesterone will increase until a period starts. 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 regular means the cycle is about the same number of days every cycle. People with regular cycles can still have changes in how long flow happens or how light or heavy it is. It's common for people with regular periods to have what's called a "standard deviation" — a common difference — of around five days with how long their menstrual cycle lasts each time. Not everyone has regular menstrual cycles. Most people have periods for around 40 years. Periods will change through those years. Changes are common and don't always mean something is wrong.

Sometimes people skip periods. Periods can also come later than expected. This can happen because of pregnancy. Late periods can happen for other reasons too. Illness, unmanaged stress, hormonal or body changes, eating disorders, exercise, and birth control can all affect a menstrual cycle. If someone doesn't know why they missed a period, they should see a

healthcare provider. People can experience painful periods, heavy flow, or other big symptoms. These symptoms can be difficult to manage. A healthcare provider can help with managing these symptoms.

Menstrual flow will stain and can go through clothes. There are a few options for managing menstrual flow.

**Pads:** Pads are worn inside underwear and absorb flow. People change them when they're getting full or when they want to. Pads often the best choice for someone new to periods, for heavy flow, or during sleep. There are disposable pads and washable pads, and both can be found online or at in-person stores. Washable pads can be worn many times. They are better for the environment, can be more comfortable, and cost less long-term. They can be washed and dried, just like underwear.

**Insertables:** These are inserted into the vagina to catch or absorb flow. They're good for swimming, sports, or for people who don't like pads. People can usually get them at in-person stores or online. Tampons are usually easier to find at in-person stores than cups or sponges.

- **Tampons:** These are the most common insertable. Tampons are safe to use when the directions are followed. One risk with tampons is Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS). TSS is rare, but serious. It can cause severe medical problems. People using tampons should change them often, only during the day, and use 100% cotton tampons, without bleaches or synthetic materials.
- **Sea sponges:** These are small natural, recyclable, reusable sponges. People can wet them, squeeze the water out, and slide them into the vagina. They should be changed often. People can reuse them by squeezing out the flow 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.
- **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 up to 12 hours at a time. They cost less long-term than tampons or sponges.

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