Know Your Flow
A GUIDE TO PERIODS

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WHAT’S HAPPENING ON THE OUTSIDE?
YOUR BRAIN IS CHANGING, TOO

Your Period

WHAT IS IT?
HOW OFTEN DOES IT COME?
WHAT’S A PERIOD FOR?

The Cycle

THE FOUR STAGES

Tracking Your Period

HOW + WHY
COMMON QUESTIONS
EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW
PREMENSTRUAL SYNDROME (AKA PMS)
WHAT IS IT?

Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS)

WHAT IS IT?

Self-Care

COMING UP WITH A PLAN BODY, MIND + HAPPINESS SYMPTOMS + SOLUTIONS
Puberty

What’s happening on the outside?

When you go through puberty, lots of changes take place on the outside of your body. You’ll get taller, you’ll develop breasts, you’ll grow hair in your armpits and around your privates, and you may notice vaginal discharge in your underwear. These are all totally normal and just mean you’re growing up!

Your brain is changing, too.

While these changes are happening on the outside of your body, changes are happening on the inside, too. The first place these changes happen is in the brain.

In the brain there is something called the Prefrontal Cortex and the Limbic System. When you’re young, these systems are still developing, and they contribute to complex thinking, our emotions, and regulating our hormones. These rapidly changing and growing systems are why it’s totally normal for teens to experience quick changes in mood!

During puberty, the pituitary gland (also in our brains!) tells our ovaries to start producing two hormones: estrogen and progesterone. These hormones cause the physical changes we see in our bodies (like getting taller), but also cause invisible things like our emotions to change too. Along with all of these changes also comes our first period.
Your Period

Getting your period is probably the biggest change you’ll experience during puberty. You might hear it referred to differently by many people. But whatever the name, it’s all the same. Menstruation is what we call the days of the month when you begin to shed tissue, fluid, and blood (also known as menstrual fluid or period blood) from your uterus and eventually out of your vagina.

How often does it come and how long does it last?

Well, that can change. Periods come on average every 21-31 days, and last between 1-7 days. However, every body is different and periods can be shorter or longer from person to person. It all depends!

Everyone gets their period at the time that’s right for them. You might be the first of your friends to get it, or you might be the last to. The average range for most people is between the 8 and 15 years of age. Sometimes people who are very really athletic or very thin won’t get their period until a bit later. This has to do with the amount of body fat we have. So whether you’re early or late, just know that no period is perfect, everyone’s experience is different, and your time is the right time for you!

Why do we get periods?

We get our first periods during puberty, which means we’re transforming into adults. Being an adult (especially an adult with a uterus!) means that we have the incredible ability to create life and have children – if you want to and are ready to, that is. Every month your body goes through a cycle to prepare for this opportunity. Each cycle is built up of 4 stages. Let’s take a look at those stages in depth!
Stage 1: Pre-Ovulation

Inside your body there are two little sacs called ovaries that contain hundreds of thousands of tiny eggs. Each month estrogen (that’s a hormone) tells your body to release one of these eggs. While this is happening, the uterus lining (also known as endometrium) starts to thicken.

Stage 2: Ovulations

Ovulation occurs when a mature egg is released from the ovary. After the egg is released, it travels along the fallopian tube to the thickening endometrium.

One of two things can happen here: the egg could be fertilized by sperm, which is the male reproductive cell. If fertilization occurs, a baby develops. If there is no fertilization, no baby will develop. Throughout your cycle, you’ll notice vaginal discharge that changes colour and consistency. These changes have to do with where you are in your cycle and your changing hormones!
Stage 3: Pre-Menstrual

When the egg is not fertilized, it breaks down and the nutrient-rich endometrium is no longer needed. As a result, hormone levels in the body drop and peak. This causes the endometrium to shed, and can also cause people to experience a set of symptoms known as Premenstrual Syndrome (also known as PMS).

Stage 4: Menstruation

The endometrium leaves the body through the vagina as a fluid containing blood and tissue. This substance can be thick, watery, brown, gooey, red, or translucent. This is your period! Menstruation looks different depending on where you are in your cycle. For many people, day 1 and day 2 have the heaviest flow. That means on those days your body will expel the largest amount of fluid, whereas on day 3 many people have very little fluid. It’s different for everyone, but there are ways to know what to expect and keep yourself ready!
Tracking Your Period

Tracking your cycle is easy! Just fill in the information below and we’ll show you what your cycle may look like.

Why you should

Your cycle is unique to you. It might only be 21 days, or it might be 35! To get to know your body better, it is important to track your own cycle. The more intimately you know your own body, the more easily you can recognize when something is wrong. A change in your menstrual cycle is often the first obvious symptom for several women’s health issues. One late, early, or missed period isn’t cause for alarm, but if the menstrual irregularity is coupled with other symptoms, you should see your doctor. The better you know your flow, the better informed you can stay about your health.

The easiest way to track your cycle is to start with the first day of your last period. The first day you start bleeding is Day 1.

Tracking your cycle is easy! Just fill in the information below and we’ll show you what your cycle may look like.

First day of bleeding? : (i.e. January 5, 2017)

How many days did you bleed for? :

First day of your next period? :

How many days between the 2 cycles? Check the calendar!
In this example, the first day of bleeding (day 1) falls on the first day of the month. The menstruation continues for 5 days, and the full cycle in this example goes on for 30 days! On the calendars below, fill in your period. Which day does it fall on? Colour it in! (note: if the month has 30 days, just cross off the 31!)
You may have noticed a section of the cycle says “Premenstrual Syndrome,” commonly referred to as PMS! But what is it?

PMS is a set of possible physical and emotional responses to the hormone levels changing in our bodies as we approach menstruation. PMS symptoms are not the same for everyone, and can change throughout your lifetime.

Which symptoms do you experience? (Challenge: Try circling the emotional symptoms in red and the physical symptoms in blue!)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Premenstrual Syndrome</th>
<th>acne</th>
<th>bloating</th>
<th>constipation</th>
<th>cramping</th>
<th>cravings</th>
<th>diarrhea</th>
<th>difficulty</th>
<th>sleeping</th>
<th>headache</th>
<th>irritability</th>
<th>joint pain</th>
<th>mood swings</th>
<th>muscle ache</th>
<th>tender</th>
<th>breasts</th>
<th>tiredness</th>
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Self-Care

Your period can make your emotions feel different than they usually do, and that can be a difficult change to adjust to. Not everyone will experience these symptoms, but it does happen to many of us. Just remember that it’s normal and can be managed with self-care!

Self-care isn’t just important during PMS and your period, it’s important to practice self-care every day of your life! Try to recognize the way you’re feeling throughout the month and think about why you might be feeling that way. To help take care of yourself, try making a self-care plan. To start, make a list of some things you enjoy doing—things that make you feel happier or more relaxed:

1. 

2. 

3. 

4. 

5. 

Unsure of what to write down? Here are some examples of common self-care practices:

**Exercise**

Do you have a favourite sport or activity that involves exercise? Exercise releases hormones called endorphins. Endorphins can help us feel less pain, feel happier, and overall have a positive effect on our bodies!

**Journaling**

Reflecting on the way you’re feeling and writing it down can help sort out confusing emotions.

Try writing down how you feel and why you think you feel that way. If you’re feeling down, write 3 things everyday that you’re grateful for!
Reading or Netflix

Many PMS symptoms can make us feel upset, irritated, and uncomfortable. Sometimes we just need to get away from those feelings for a little while. Try snuggling up with a favourite book or movie and getting lost in the story. It’s a great way to take our minds off of the things around us.

In the circles below, write in the ways you can take care of yourself and your body. Ask yourself, what can I do for my mind (meditation, deep breathing, keeping a journal)? What can I do for my body (stretch, exercise, eat healthy)? What can I do for my happiness (things you love and enjoy)?

You are real and you are important! Love your body and treat it well. It’s the only body you’ll ever have!

It’s so important to treat your body with compassion and kindness. That means accepting your body for what it is, no matter what. Try not to look at your body in comparison to others, because a lot of the bodies we see online, on TV and in magazines aren’t real.
Solutions

Sometimes we experience symptoms that we aren’t sure how to cope with. On the next few pages we’ll go over some common symptoms, reasons why they happen, and some useful tips and tricks to help cope with these new changes!

Symptom + Solution

**Constipation** and other changes in bowel movements are caused by progesterone as well! Progesterone can slow down digestion in the intestines which can lead to constipation.

To relieve constipation it’s wise to look at your diet. Fiber is an easy way to relieve discomfort. Fibre can be found in fruits, vegetables, and whole wheat bread! Other things to help with constipation are: increased water intake, less sugar, and less salt.

**Acne** is caused by rising levels of the hormone progesterone. Progesterone tells our skin to produce extra sebum – that’s a thick oily substance that can clog our pores and cause breakouts.

Hormonal acne can only be treated from the inside, so talk to your doctor if you experience frequent acne right before your period. From the outside, you can help your skin by eating healthy and washing your face twice daily with a gentle cleanser.

**Cramping** is caused by the contractions of the uterus as it sheds tissue. For some people cramps can be very painful and unbearable. If your cramping is severe please visit a doctor!

For the average cramping, taking a painkiller such as ibuprofen is often helpful, as well as using a hot water bottle and doing pelvic stretches.
**Cravings** of unhealthy fatty foods, sweets and carbs during PMS are caused by peaks in our stress hormones. Indulging in these a lot can make you feel tired and sluggish.

There are many possible ways to combat these cravings! Many people will eat 3 large meals during the day, which leaves a lot of room for us to be hungry and develop cravings. Having more, smaller, meals during the day can help fight cravings. Eating more fibre-rich foods, nuts, and proteins, while keeping active are all good ways to block cravings as well!

**Bloating** right before your period is caused by our bodies retaining excess water.

If you’re feeling bothered by bloating, you can help to lessen the sensation by watching what you eat. Salt and salty foods will make your bloating feel worse – so try to avoid those if you often experience this PMS symptom!

Many people will have **trouble sleeping** before they get their periods. Changing levels of the hormone estrogen are to blame for these sleepless nights.

In order to get that good night’s sleep, it’s wise to introduce more exercise into your days, and avoid caffeine if you usually consume it (caffeine can be found in coffee, tea, some sodas, and candy bars! If you are going to have tea, try something that has valerian roof in it – it’s a natural way to feel sleepy.

**Headaches** and body pains are frequently experienced as PMS symptoms. As you might have already guessed, the reason we experience these aches and pains is because of hormones. Hormones cause headaches even when they’re not from PMS!

The best way to fight headaches and aches is to relax and avoid stress. Take it easy, have a bath, stay out of bright lights, drink lots of water, and take a painkiller such as ibuprofen if you need to.

**Mood swings** can make us feel sad, angry, anxious and stable. Not feeling like you have control over your emotions can be very difficult. To help cope, take extra good care of yourself. Get extra sleep, exercise more, eat well, and do the things that you enjoy to make you feel happy and stable.
Everybody has a different flow. It could be light, regular, or heavy. Some days could be light, while others might be heavier. What you choose to use will depend on your unique period.

Period products or menstrual hygiene products are what we call the products you use before, during, and after your period. They help absorb the flow of menstrual fluid.

There is a spectrum of products to choose from, so let’s take a look!

**Pads**

Pads are an external means of protection that you wear in your underwear. One side of a pad is coated in a sticky tape that helps to attach it to the inside of your underwear. The other side is soft and very absorbent. This part is worn right against the vagina and can help catch and absorb your period.

There are many types of pads to choose from. First of all, pads will come in 2 varieties: with wings and without wings. Some people find that winged pads will stay in place better, as there are extra pieces to stick onto underwear.

Pads also come in many different absorbencies:

**PANTY LINERS**

These are the least absorbent style of pad. They are often quite thin and used during light periods, spotting (before or after your period starts), or worn with tampons for extra protection.
REGULAR
The name “regular” says it all! These pads are medium absorbency, medium length, medium thickness. If you’re not sure how heavy your flow will be, regular is a good choice.

MAXI
These pads are much thicker than the previous two, and can absorb a much heavier flow. Some people enjoy wearing maxi pads overnight while they sleep due to the high absorbency.

Tampons
Tampons are small cotton plugs that are worn inside the vagina to help absorb period blood. They are a popular choice as they are compact, and allow for a lot of movement and activity.

There are two types of tampons to consider: tampons with applicators and tampons without applicators. There is no difference between the tampons - it’s just whether you prefer to insert the tampon with your finger or with an extra piece of material that works as a barrier and a guide!

Just like pads, tampons come in a range of absorbencies to match your flow.

Light, regular, and super are the 3 most common absorbency levels for tampons, and these correspond to your flow in the same way that pads do!
Before you try putting in your first tampon, it’s good to get familiar with your body. Use a hand-mirror to look at your vulva. You’ll notice three holes: your urethral opening (1), vagina (2), and your anus (3). The vagina is where menstrual fluid will be coming out of, and where you’ll insert your first tampon.

**Inserting a Tampon**

Using a tampon for the first time can be tricky. Don’t get discouraged if it doesn’t work out the first time! It can take a few tries to get it right.

**STEP 1:** Choose a tampon that’s right for your flow. Start with a low absorbency and only go higher if you are having leaks or changing it too often!

**STEP 2:** Wash your hands. It’s important to make sure your hands are clean and free of bacteria before and after you insert.

**STEP 3:** Find a position that’s comfortable for you. Some people find it easier to insert a tampon with a leg raised and resting on the bath ledge or toilet seat. Other people may prefer squatting slightly.

**STEP 4:** Remove the packing of your tampon of choice. What happens next will depend on if you are using a tampon with an applicator, or one without!

**WITHOUT AN APPLICATOR**

Pull the tampon from side to side in all directions to create a small pocket for your finger to go in. Next, use the top of the tampon to find your vaginal opening. Once it’s lined up, begin to push upwards and slightly toward your lower back until the tampon is completely inserted, comfortable, and the string is hanging out.
WITH AN APPLICATOR

Find your vaginal opening with the tip of the tampon applicator. The two tubes should be fully visible while this step takes place. Using the same slightly-toward-back angle, begin to insert the top section of the tube. Once that’s in approximately 2 – 2.5 inches, push the smaller tube up so it’s hidden. Remove the applicator and leave the tampon string hanging out!

WHEN DO I CHANGE THEM?

When you change your tampons depends on your flow. Pads and tampons can hold different amounts of menstrual fluid depending on their size (light, regular, super, overnight), so it will depend on the day and heaviness of your flow.

If your tampon is leaking, soaking through, or beginning to smell, it is a good time to change it. To be safe, tampons should always be changed within 4-6 hours of use. Wearing a tampon for too long can put you at risk for toxic shock syndrome (TSS).

TSS is rare but it can never hurt to be safe! Just make sure that you wear tampons appropriate for your flow, take them out by 6 hours, and cut the risk even more by choosing organic.
Reusable Pads

Reusable pads are worn inside the underwear in a similar way as single use pads. Reusable pads have a snap button to help attach it in place. These pads absorb menstrual fluid into the fabric (often fleece or flannel), and are washed after each use. You can buy additional inserts to put into the pad so it can last your whole cycle!

Reusable pads can be washed by hand or by machine with regular detergent. We recommend pre-soaking or rinsing your pads in cold water before washing.

Period Underwear

These absorbent pairs of underwear can be worn throughout the day, keeping you leak free and extremely comfortable. No need for pads or tampons with these! Just like reusable pads, period underwear can be worn over and over again. They just need to be washed after each use. Period underwear are made up of absorbent material that is leak proof and odour resistant. You wear them like normal, and change them at the end of the day! To wash, rinse the underwear in cold water and then proceed to wash as usual. Just be sure not to use any fabric softener or bleach!
Menstrual Cups

Menstrual cups are soft silicone cups that are worn inside of the vagina to collect menstrual fluid. They are flexible, washable, and reusable. One cup can last up to 10 years!

When using a menstrual cup, you should empty it every 4-12 hours (depending on your flow), wash it in the sink, and then reinsert as needed. After your cycle is over, you should sterilize the cup by sitting it in boiling water for about 10 minutes.

Menstrual cups can be folded in many different shapes to make it easy for insertion into the vagina. It should sit comfortabably at the top of the vaginal canal, suctioning itself against the cervix. At the bottom of all cups is a stem, which is necessary for removal. To remove, simply pull the stem downward until you can reach the base of the cup. Pinching the base will release the seal which will allow it to come out easily!

Start by folding your menstrual cup into a small, narrow, shape. Try one of these 3 popular folds!

The rest of the insertion should be quite similar to inserting a tampon. The only difference is that once the cup is no longer folded it will expand open into its full cup shape! It should feel comfortable and sit like this in your body:
There are options as unique as you!

This is Marta. She’s just gotten her first period and isn’t sure yet which product is best for her. Right now she prefers pads as they are easy to put on and take off.

As a new mother, Bea’s cycle is irregular again, and she is often spotting between periods. She prefers panty liners for the spotting, and reusable pads on the days where her flow is heavier.

Nitya got her first period at age 15, which often happens if you’re as athletic as she is! She prefers tampons as they are very comfortable during her activities.

Sam was born with a uterus and identifies as a male. He prefers period underwear as he doesn’t have to worry about changing them throughout the day.

Karen is entering into menopause, which means that her body is no longer releasing eggs. Her period is irregular, and so she prefers panty liners and pads.
Is everything ok?

Because every period is different, there isn’t one “normal” way for a cycle to look. However, there are some experiences that are abnormal, that you should look out for and tell your doctor about.

If you experience heavy bleeding for more than 7 days in a row, talk to your doctor. Heavy bleeding for a long time can make your body be low on iron, which makes you feel very tired. If you’re not bleeding at all, you should also talk to your doctor. Irregular cycles are usually nothing to worry about, but they can signal a health condition, so it’s good to get it checked out either way!

If you experience severe cramping, you may have a condition called endometriosis and you should talk to your doctor about it.

Tracking your period is a great way to look at what’s normal for you and your cycle, so if you do experience something abnormal it will be easier to notice and get taken care of!

Common Questions

Can anyone tell I’m having my period?
No! Not unless you tell them, that is.

Can I exercise during menstruation?
Yes! It’s actually recommended to. Light stretches and workouts can help reduce cramping and make you feel happier, too.

Can I take a bath during my period??
Of course! Because of the water pressure, when you’re in water your menstrual fluid won’t actually go outside of your vagina.
Can anyone tell I’m having my period?
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Can I exercise during menstruation?
Yes! It’s actually recommended to. Light stretches and workouts can help reduce cramping and make you feel happier, too.

Can I take a bath during my period?
Of course! Because of the water pressure, when you’re in water your menstrual fluid won’t actually go outside of your vagina.

Can I go swimming during my period?
Yes. When you go swimming you should be using a tampon and not a pad. Tampons will absorb your menstrual flow, not the water in the pool!

Can anyone smell my period?
If you change your pads and tampons regularly, nobody will be able to tell!

Why’s there white fluid on my underwear?
What you’re seeing is vaginal discharge. This is totally normal as it’s our bodies natural way of cleaning the vagina. If your discharge starts to smell or change into a colour that isn’t white, clear, or cloudy, then you could talk to your doctor about it. Some people will wear a pantyliner to help collect excess discharge.

At what age can I use tampons?
You can use them whenever you feel ready! Choose whatever product works for you.

What if I can’t find the string?
If for some reason your tampon string is no longer sticking outside of your body, use a clean finger to feel for it inside the vagina.

Can the tampon get lost or fall out?
Definitely not! Your cervix blocks the tampons from travelling any further than where you inserted it. Tampons are held in place by the muscular walls of your vagina, so once it’s in, it will not fall out.
Does it hurt to put in a tampon?
If it’s your first time using a tampon, it may feel slightly uncomfortable to put in. If you’re using the right size and putting it in the right place it should feel like it’s not even there!

Does it hurt to wear a tampon?
You will know the tampon is in fully when you can no longer feel it. If it feels uncomfortable while you are wearing it, it may not be inserted deep enough. Take out the tampon and try it again – it can take a few tries to get the hang of!

Can you lose your virginity to a tampon?
No! Absolutely not. Your virginity has nothing to do with using tampons and can be defined by you when you’re sexually active.

Am I able to pee while wearing a tampon?
Yes! Urine comes out of your urethra, whereas your tampon is in your vagina. You may want to move the string out of the way before you start peeing, though.

Glossary

**ANUS**
The opening where the gastrointestinal tract ends and exits the body.

**CERVIX**
The narrow passage forming the lower end of the uterus.

**ENDOMETRIUM**
The mucous membrane lining the uterus, which thickens during the menstrual cycle in preparation for possible implantation of an embryo.

**ESTROGEN**
Any of a group of steroid hormones that promote the development and maintenance of female characteristics of the body. Such hormones are also produced artificially for use in oral contraceptives or to treat menopausal and menstrual disorders.

**FALLOPIAN TUBES**
A pair of tubes in the reproductive system which allow eggs to travel from the ovaries to the uterus.
FERTILIZATION
The process of combining an egg (ovum) with sperm to create a zygote.

OVULATION
The process of an egg leaving the ovary.

HORMONE
A chemical substance produced in our bodies that helps to control and regulate our cells, organs, behaviour, and mood.

UTERUS
This is our reproductive organ! This is the site of ovulation, menstruation, and where babies grow.

IRREGULAR
An abnormal variation in length of menstrual cycles.

MENARCHE
The first occurrence of menstruation.

PRE-MENSTRUAL SYNDROME
The physical and emotional symptoms that some people experience in the weeks leading up to menstruation.

MENSES
Blood and other matter discharged from the uterus during menstruation.

PUBERTY
The time in which adolescents reach sexual maturity and become capable of reproduction.

MENSTRUAL CYCLE
The process of ovulation and menstruation that we experience repeatedly from menarche to menopause.

PERIOD
Another way to say menstruation.

MENSTRUATION
One of the stages of the menstrual cycle in which the lining and tissue of the uterus is shed through the vagina.

PROGESTERONE
A steroid hormone that stimulates the uterus to prepare for pregnancy.
OVARIES
A part of the reproductive organ that contains and produces eggs.

SPERM
A reproductive cell found in the male reproductive organ. To create a baby, a sperm cell needs to fertilize an egg in the uterus.

OVA / OVUM
The singular and plural names for the eggs in the ovaries. They can be fertilized by sperm eventually turning into an embryo.

TIME OF THE MONTH
Another way to say menstruation (as many people’s cycles are roughly a month long).

URETHRAL OPENING
The opening where the urethra (a tube) connects the bladder. This is where pee comes out of.

VAGINA
The muscular canal that extends from the vulva to the cervix. This is where menstrual fluid exits the body during menstruation, where sexual intercourse leading to reproduction takes place, and where babies exit the body during childbirth.

VAGINAL DISCHARGE
A combination of fluid and cells that are continuously shed through the vagina. Normal discharge helps keep vaginal tissues healthy, provides lubrication and protects against infection and irritation. The amount, color and consistency of normal discharge varies from whitish and sticky to clear and watery. It depends on the stage of your menstrual cycle. Abnormal discharge (having an unusual appearance or smell) may be a sign that something is wrong.

VULVA
The external genitals. Many people will refer to the external genitals as the vagina but that is incorrect. The vagina is the canal inside of our bodies, though it is visible as a small hole from the outside.