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PERIOD CLUES • HOT TRACK • BACKDOOR SAFETY



REPORT

WHAT YOUR FLOW KNOWS

Periods hold surprising secrets about overall health. Find out what's normal and what's not.

BY MICHELLE KONSTANTINOVSKY

YOUR PERIOD ISN'T just a pain (in the lower back, abdomen, breasts...), it's now also considered a legit vital sign by the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG)—just as important as your temperature and pulse. “It’s a window into a woman’s health,” explains Alyssa Dweck, MD, a gynecologist in New York and assistant clinical professor at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine. Meaning: A persistent change in your monthly visitor could signal there’s something haywire elsewhere in your bod.

“If your cycle is off, it may be a symptom of other medical conditions,” says Marcelle Cedars, MD, director of

reproductive endocrinology at the University of California at San Francisco. For example, “too” periods (too light, too heavy, too painful) can indicate anything from an eating disorder to a blood-clotting issue to a thyroid condition.

Experts suspect this connection is protective—if something sketchy is brewing, you likely wouldn’t be able to carry a baby, so your reproductive system slows or shuts down. “Perhaps anovulation, when you don’t ovulate, or amenorrhea, when you skip periods, is nature’s way of protecting a woman from getting pregnant while under significant stress,” says Dr. Dweck. So basically, a weird

shark week is evolution’s way of saying, Hey, get healthy so humanity can thrive!

Too bad not everyone is paying attention. A 2002 report found that physicians often ignored amenorrhea or failed to run tests to determine its cause. Nearly 50 percent of women with menstrual irregularities had to visit three different MDs before even getting a proper exam!

Things are improving, says Dr. Dweck, but stay safe by knowing your personal norm. Track when your period is due, how long it typically lasts, and how many tampons or pads you use each day. Noticing any anomalies can help you thwart bigger problems and keep you in tip-top shape.

And if your period does any of the following things, see your doc, stat.

It Shows Up Unannounced

A normal cycle spans 21 to 45 days, with bleeding that lasts about 7 days. “If you’re menstruating more often than every three weeks or less than every 45 days, something may be up,” says Dr. Dweck. Potential causes include a thyroid disorder, abnormally low BMI (due to diet or exercise), uterine polyps or fibroids, polycystic ovarian syndrome, and even

We ♥ This Period Tracker

Most monitoring apps keep tabs on your menstruation and alert you when you’re most and least fertile. The MyFLO app (\$1.99, froliving.com) lets you record PMS symptoms, offers diet and exercise advice to offset pain, and can alert your partner to your mood (it even suggests ways for him to stay in your good graces). #Genius.

cervical cancer. Another sneaky culprit: pregnancy. Yup, it can cause abnormal bleeding (so, obviously, can a miscarriage).

It Flows Like Niagara Falls

Periods usually require between three and six regular-absorbency pads or tampons every 24 hours, according to the ACOG. Any more, or a sudden gush, can indicate fibroids, polyps, endometriosis, pelvic inflammatory disease, or thyroid or bleeding issues. Seemingly innocuous meds, like aspirin, can also affect your tide.

It Goes MIA

If you get a super-light period—or none at all—don’t necessarily consider yourself lucky. It could be the result of an abnormally low BMI, a hormone imbalance—possibly brought on by your BC pills—or, right, a pregnancy.

It’s Killing You!

“Occasional cramping is nothing to worry about,” says naturopath Lara Briden, author of *Period Repair Manual*. But if the pain is so bad that it’s making you vomit or miss work, something more troublesome—like endometriosis or fibroids—is most likely the cause. ■



HEALTH HACK

BACK-THERE PLAY? USE A CONDOM

Sixty percent of women reported using no protection the last time they had anal sex, per a study of 10,000 women in 20 U.S. cities. But even though there’s no such thing as backdoor baby making, a rubber is still a must. Skip one and you’re putting yourself at risk for an STI. A whopping 40 percent of HIV infections among women may have been contracted during anal sex, according to the HIV Research for Prevention Conference. Compounding the issue? According to the study, women who engaged in rear entry tended to do other things that upped their chances of getting an infection: They reported three times as many sexual partners and were 50 percent more likely to have casual sex than women who never get butt love. Bottom line: Always protect yourself.

—DANIELLE KAM

FROM LEFT: LEVI BROWN/TRUNK ARCHIVE; GETTY IMAGES.



Ask Dr. Ashton

How do I know whether I have BV or a yeast infection?

Bacterial vaginosis (BV) is caused by an overgrowth of bacteria. Its telltale sign is a strong fishy odor with a thin, gray discharge, and some ladies are just more susceptible than others. Yeast infections, caused by an overgrowth of the yeast candida, are itchy and can have a thicker discharge. Lower your chances of getting the latter by taking probiotics and sleeping without underwear. Not sure which you might have? Your doc will do a culture before treating you with antibiotics for BV or an oral or vaginal antifungal for a yeast infection.

SOURCE: JENNIFER ASHTON, MD, OB-GYN AND ABC NEWS CHIEF WOMEN'S HEALTH CORRESPONDENT