

What you need to know



PERIODS



A booklet about **starting periods**
and what to do when you start having them.



WHAT AND WHY

A period (sometimes called menstruation) is bleeding through your vagina that lasts for 2–8 days.

Q. When will my periods start?

- ☐ eight years old?
- ☐ 13 years old?
- ☐ 16 years old?

Usually when you're between 11 and 15 but you could be anything from eight to 16. Your periods will start when your body is ready. You can't make them start or stop them from starting.

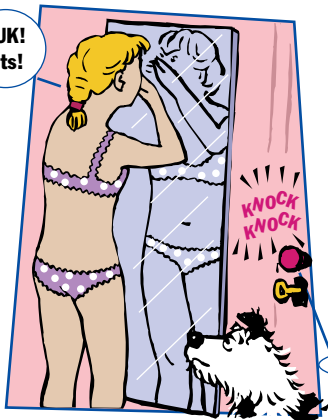
“

My two best friends have started their periods. I'm 12 and worried that it hasn't happened to me yet.

”



**YUK!
Zits!**

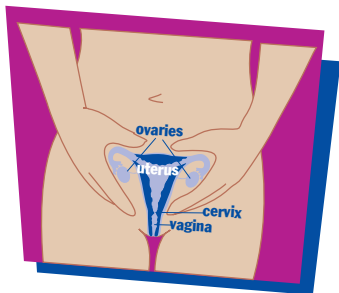


The changes to do with growing up are called **puberty.**

During puberty your breasts will start to grow, and hair begins to grow under your arms and between your legs. Changes also happen inside your body, preparing your body for having a baby one day, if you choose to.

What's she DOING in there?

How YOUR BODY WORKS

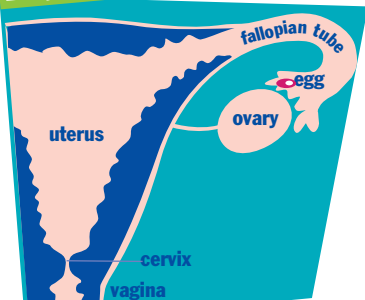


Put your thumbs and fingers together in a triangle like in this picture. The space in between your hands will give you a rough idea of where your ovaries and **uterus** are inside your body, and how much space they take up. The uterus is also called the **womb**.

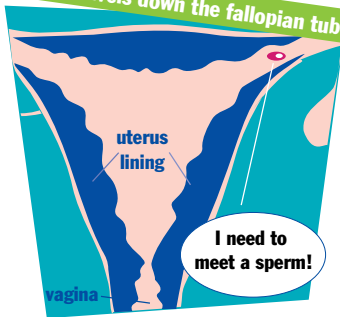
You have thousands of tiny eggs in your **ovaries**. When you reach puberty usually one egg is released every month from one of your ovaries. This is called **ovulation**.

The egg is tiny — much smaller than in the diagrams on this page. The egg moves along the **fallopian tube** to your **uterus**. The uterus is where a baby would grow if the egg were **fertilised** by a sperm.

Every month, an egg leaves the ovary...



...and travels down the fallopian tube...

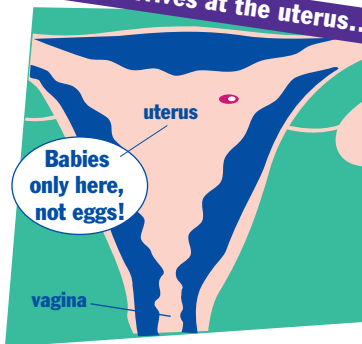


Your uterus gets ready for a possible pregnancy each month and its lining becomes thick and soft. If an egg isn't fertilised and doesn't implant in the uterus to start a baby, the uterus lining passes out of your body as blood through your vagina. This is your period.

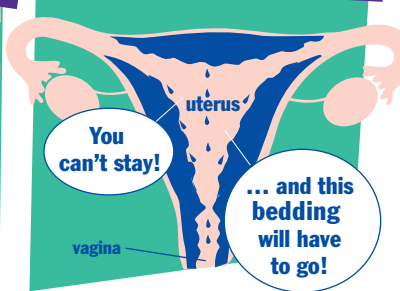


HOW LONG DO PERIODS LAST?

The egg arrives at the uterus...



So...



“

The time between the first day of one period and the day before the start of the next is called the **menstrual cycle**.

People often talk about having a monthly or 28 day cycle, but many people have a cycle that's longer or shorter than that and this is normal.

So you won't necessarily be the same as your friends.

I was about 11. Sometimes I noticed a yellowy-white stain in my pants. I was too embarrassed to tell my mum. A year later I started my periods. ”

Vaginal secretions (sometimes called discharge) are normal. They're a natural fluid that helps keep your vagina healthy.

Some girls notice an increase in vaginal secretions about two weeks before each period.

Q How long will I have periods for?

A Until you're about 50. Women who are pregnant stop having periods. When they've had their baby, their periods start again.

Q Will I know when my period's about to start?

A Your breasts may become tender and / or a bit larger. You may get spots on your face or feel a bit moody the week before your period starts. You may get stomach cramps just before you start to bleed. Pain usually lasts for the first few days of the period when the blood flow is heaviest.

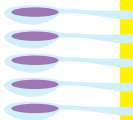
FACTS ABOUT PERIODS



Q How much blood will I lose during my period?

- ☐ A teaspoon? ☐ 3–5 tablespoons?
☐ A cup?

A It may look like a lot but it's only about 3–5 tablespoons. It's unlikely to be a sudden gush of blood that will take you by surprise. You'll probably see a red-brown stain on your pants or on your sheets when you wake up in the morning.



Periods come about once every month, but your body needs practice to get this right. So for the first year or more the time between your periods may be different. This can make it difficult to know when you'll have your period.

After a while your periods should become more regular. You can then use a chart, diary or app to work out when your period might be due.



Q How long will my period last?

A Some girls may bleed for around two or three days, others for up to eight days. Most bleed for about four or five days. Your periods may be different each time, especially when you first start.

Q When can a girl become pregnant?

A As soon as she starts to ovulate. Ovulation always occurs before a period – usually 10–16 days before the first day of the next period.

Q Can a girl get pregnant during her periods?

A Yes, if she has sex. The time when your body releases an egg can vary and a sperm can live in your body as long as 5–7 days.

“

One minute I feel fine. The next I feel upset. No-one understands me. ”



DO PERIODS HURT?

Some girls have cramps very low in their stomach when they have a period. Holding a hot water bottle against your stomach may make you feel better.

If you're unlucky enough to get really bad pains that you can't cope with, don't suffer in silence. Talk to your mum, dad or carer.

At school, the secretary or nurse will probably be able to help you, or see your doctor.



Exercise and eating plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables will help with constipation (when you can't poo), which is very common at this time.

You may feel more comfortable wearing loose clothes.

Exercise often helps period pain. You may bleed more heavily when you exercise so it's a good idea to change your pad, tampon or menstrual cup (see next page) before you start any exercise.

If you use a tampon or menstrual cup you can go swimming as the blood is held inside you.

It can take some time to get used to having periods and feeling confident about dealing with them.

But periods are a sign that your body is working, and they are a normal, healthy, special part of being female.

WHAT TO USE?



“

My older sister was the best. I went home and told her what had happened and she went into it all with me. She made me laugh, she told me all these stories about what happened to her. Since then, I've been able to say anything to her.

”

You can use **sanitary towels** (also known as **menstrual pads**), **tampons**, a **menstrual cup** or **period-proof pants** to collect the blood.

Sanitary towels soak up the blood as it leaves your body. **Tampons** fit inside your vagina and absorb the blood before it leaves your body.

A **menstrual cup** is a silicone cup that fits inside your vagina and collects the blood. It can be left in up to 8 hours and then emptied, rinsed and re-inserted.



Period-proof pants are worn instead of your usual pants and soak up the blood. They can be washed and re-used.

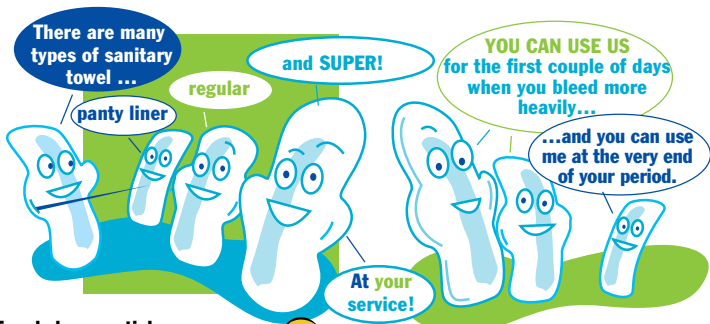
One method isn't better than the others.

It's for you to decide which you find easiest and most comfortable to use. Some women may choose to use a **panty liner** as well.





WHAT KIND OF TOWEL?



Towels have a sticky strip that sticks to the inside of your pants. You need to pull the covering off the sticky strip and stick your towel onto your pants longways.



It's really stuck!

Some pads don't have a front or back and can be placed either way.



Towels should not be put down the toilet as they can block it. They should be wrapped up...



Many toilets have special bins for this ...

... but if there isn't a bin, wrap the towel in toilet paper and put it in the nearest bin you can find.

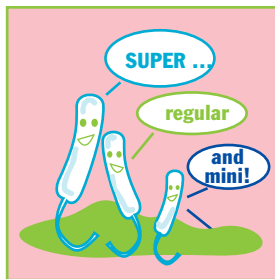


Finding the towel you prefer will help you feel comfortable.
You can also get towels made of cloth that can be washed and reused.

FACTS ABOUT TAMPONS



Tampons also come in different sizes...



Mini or slender tampons are easiest when you're first starting to use tampons.

Some of us have a tube on the outside to help you put us in.



... and we all have a string for you to pull us out easily!

With us, you can use fingers!

It may take some practice before you can use tampons as it can take a while to get the hang of them.

Before you put a tampon in, you'll need to find your vagina. Try using a mirror to see where the opening is.

You could try gently sliding a clean finger into your vagina. Aim it towards your back, not directly upwards or across.



Q Does putting in a tampon for the first time hurt?

A No, not if you relax. It's difficult to put a tampon in if you're tense and not sure how to put it in. Read the instructions that come with tampons to find out how to put them in. If the tampon feels uncomfortable it may not be in far enough.

Q Can I practise using tampons before my periods start?

A It's not really a good idea to use tampons when you don't have a period as they can cause dryness and irritation. It's much easier to put a tampon in when you're having a period.

Q What if the string breaks and I can't get the tampon out?

A The string won't break. It's joined firmly to the tampon. A tampon can't get lost inside you. It stays in the vagina until you take it out.

Q Can I go to the toilet when I've got a tampon in?

A Yes. You go to the toilet from your urethra and anus. The vagina is separate from these, so it doesn't matter if you're using a tampon.

TAMPONS OR TOWELS?



My sister prefers to use towels.

Mine says that once she got used to tampons she didn't want to change back.



Using tampons is against some religions and cultures – like mine.

Q Do boys know about periods?

A They may know something from relationships and sex education classes, TV ads, mums or sisters. It's often because they don't know that much that they tease girls about periods. Despite what they may say, neither they nor anyone else will know you have a period unless you tell them.



What do you know about periods?

Q How often should I change my towel or tampon?

A You must change the towel or tampon several times a day. It may not be easy to see if a tampon needs changing, but you should do this about every four hours, or sooner. Remember to wash your hands before and after you do this. Always check that you've taken out your last tampon at the end of your period.

Q Will I smell?

A You won't smell if you wash every day and change your towel or tampon every few hours. You don't need to use perfumed pads or special sprays.

In fact, these can be bad for you as they may cause irritation, and they're expensive.

Sometimes there can be problems with using tampons, leading to a serious illness called toxic shock syndrome (TSS).

If you have two or more of the following while using tampons: being sick; a rash; sore throat; sudden fever; diarrhoea, stop using tampons and see your doctor right away.



“

At first, I just didn't know what to do at all. I was confused for the first year. It was like I never knew when it would happen, and then I never had the right things. Nobody really told you about it until it was too late.

”

Your mother, father or carer may buy period products for you, or you may buy them yourself. You can buy them at pharmacies and supermarkets, and online. You may be able to get them for free from your school. Don't worry about buying them, other people won't notice. Just add them to the rest of the shopping.

Q

Are there things I shouldn't do when I've got a period?

A

No, except if you don't feel like doing them.



If possible, it's a good idea to have period products, such as towels, tampons or a menstrual cup, at home all the time. If you have your period or think it might be due, carry some with you. Or you could use a panty liner.

If you do get taken by surprise ask a friend if they have a spare pad or tampon.

Many schools have free period products available. If your school doesn't, you can often get a pad or tampon from the school nurse or secretary's office or ask any woman teacher. They're very used to being asked — you won't be the first.

If you can't get a pad or tampon straight away, you can use toilet paper in your pants until you can get hold of one.



“

The only time I don't like games is when I have my period. That's why I went home yesterday, and my Mum understands. There's nowhere you can go during PE, if you have your period, that's quiet.

”



MORE INFORMATION AND HELP

More information about puberty and growing up from FPA.



Growing up with Yasmine and Tom.
An online teaching resource for ages 5-11.



4Boys and 4Girls.
Booklets for ages 12 and above.

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The information in this booklet was accurate at the time of going to print. Next planned review by November 2022. If you'd like information on the evidence used to produce this booklet or would like to give feedback, email fpadirect@fpa.org.uk

If you've got more questions about periods talk to your parents, carers, teacher or school nurse or visit the Puberty section of the ChildLine website at www.childline.org.uk

USEFUL WORDS

PUBERTY The time when your body starts to change from a child's to an adult's.

OVARY Your body has two. They contain all your eggs.

OVULATION The release of an egg from one ovary.

FALLOPIAN TUBE A narrow tube which the egg moves down on its way from an ovary to the uterus.

UTERUS or **WOMB** This is where a baby can grow. Each month the lining gets thicker ready to receive a fertilised egg.

CERVIX Entrance to the uterus.

VAGINA A stretchy tube that joins the uterus to the outside of your body.

PERIOD or **MENSTRUATION**
Bleeding from the uterus through the vagina, lasting 2–8 days.

MENSTRUAL CYCLE The time from the beginning of one period to the day before the next period starts.

