

## Menstruation Facts

### What Is Menstruation?

You will notice many changes as you go through puberty:

- You grow taller
- Your waist gets narrower
- Your breasts develop
- Your body begins to look more womanly
- You will begin to menstruate, or have your periods

When you menstruate, bloody fluid leaves your body through the vagina. This happens about once a month. It lasts for about 3-7 days.

### Why Does Menstruation Happen?

Menstruation is part of a monthly process in which your uterus gets ready for a fertilized egg:

- The process starts right after you finish your period. As soon as the last of the menstrual fluid leaves your uterus, the lining of the uterus starts to grow and get thicker.
- At the same time, an egg ripens inside one of your ovaries. About 2 weeks before your next period, the egg pops out of the ovary and into the fallopian tube. This is called *ovulation*.
- The egg travels down the fallopian tube and into your uterus. This takes about 4 days.
- Sometimes a male sperm enters the female egg while it is in the fallopian tube. This is called *fertilization*. Fertilization is the beginning of pregnancy.
- Meanwhile, the lining of the uterus keeps getting thicker, softer and full of blood cells. If the egg was fertilized by a sperm, it moves into the uterus and attaches itself to the lining.
- Most months the egg is not fertilized. Then the uterus must get rid of its lining so that a new lining can grow the next month. When you menstruate, the lining and the old egg leave your body through the vagina.

### What Can I Expect?

#### *When will I start my period?*

Every girl has her own personal time clock that decides when she will begin to menstruate. Some girls begin their periods as early as age 9. Others do not start having periods until they are 16. You will start menstruating when your body is ready.

There is no way to know exactly when you will start, but there are some clues you can look for. When did your mother start her periods? If you have an older sister, when did she start? You are likely to start at about the same age.

Also, look at the rest of your body. Have your breasts started growing? Do you have pubic hair? These are signs that you will probably begin your period within the next year or so.

#### *How can I tell when I start my period?*

Your first sign will probably be a few spots of blood on your underwear. Or you may notice a feeling of wetness in your underwear. This may mean that you have started.

#### *How will it feel to have periods?*

At first, you may feel self-conscious and very aware of having your period. But after the first few months, you probably will not even think about it.

You may feel a little tired and grumpy the first day of your period. You also may feel a little bloated or swollen. Some girls have cramps, or pains in the abdomen, the first day or two of their periods. Cramps can be uncomfortable, but they do go away. You may think you are losing a lot of blood, but you really aren't. Only about 4 to 6 tablespoons of fluid leave the uterus during your period.

***I started my periods about a year ago, but I haven't had a period for 2 months. Is something wrong with me?***

Everything is probably just fine. Many girls skip a few periods during the first year or so after they start. With time, your body will settle into a pattern that is unique for you. Sometimes stress or other changes will cause you to miss a period or be late. If you don't have your period for 6 months, or if you have been sexually active since you first started your period, you may want to see your health care provider.

**What Should I Do?**

***What if I'm not home when I start?***

If your body signs tell you that you may start your period soon, carry a menstrual pad or tampon with you, just in case. You should also carry some change. Many public restrooms have vending machines that sell pads or tampons. If you think you have started at school, the school nurse or secretary will be able to help you.

Sometimes girls worry that blood will gush out when they have their first period. But periods usually begin slowly, with only a few drops of blood. So you will have enough time to get a pad or tampon.

***Should I use pads or tampons?***

Menstrual pads are worn outside the body. They catch the blood as it leaves the vagina. Pads have sticky strips on the back that attach to your underwear.

Tampons are worn inside the vagina. They catch the blood before it leaves your body.

Only you can decide which to use. You may want to discuss it with your mother or an adult friend. Many girls find that pads are more comfortable when they first start their periods. Then after a few months, they learn how to use tampons. Tampons are useful for swimming and active sports. (You can still swim and exercise during your period.)

Some girls have a little trouble learning how to use tampons. You may want to ask your mother or an older sister for help. Be sure to read the direction carefully. Squatting and using a mirror can help you locate your vagina and place the tampon inside.

***How often should I change my pad or tampon?***

It's a good idea to change your pad or tampon about every 3-4 hours. Make sure to carry extras with you. Changing often helps keep the blood from soaking through your clothes.

Wrap the used pad or tampon in toilet paper and throw it in the trash. Never flush a pad or tampon down the toilet. It can clog the sewer lines and cause a big mess.

***Will the blood from my period smell?***

Menstrual blood does not have an odor until it meets the air. If you change your pad or tampon often, it won't develop an odor. It also helps to bathe or shower every day.

### **Common Problems**

#### ***Menstrual Cramps:***

Some girls and women get menstrual cramps the first day or two of their periods. These can be dull, achy pains in your abdomen. They can also be sharp and painful. However, most cramps are mild.

You can try several things to relieve them:

- Rest with a heating pad or hot water bottle on your abdomen.
- Take Tylenol or Ibuprofen (pain relievers).
- Learn some exercises that can relieve cramps. Many yoga postures are helpful. And it seems that regular exercise helps prevent cramps.
- Make sure to get enough rest and eat a well-balanced diet.

Occasionally, cramps are regular and severe. If this happens to you for several months, see your health care provider.

#### ***Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS)***

Some girls and women may feel uncomfortable in the days before they begin their periods. They may feel tired and achy or sad and emotional.

If you have PMS, you can cut down on these problems in several ways:

- Cut down on how much salt and refined sugar you use.
- Don't drink caffeine – found in coffee, tea, cola drinks and chocolate.
- Try to relax as much as you can and get enough rest.
- Exercise! Regular exercise seems to help reduce stress and prevent PMS.
- Eat a variety of healthy foods.

#### ***Toxic Shock Syndrome***

This is a rare disease that has been connected to using tampons. Symptoms are a high fever, vomiting, diarrhea, light-headedness, aching muscles, headaches and a rash that looks like a sunburn.

If you have any of these symptoms while you are using a tampon, take out the tampon. See your health care provider immediately.

Here are some hints to make using a tampon safe:

- Change your tampon every 3-4 hours.
- Do not use super-absorbent tampons.
- Wear a menstrual pad while you sleep.
- Use mini-pads, not tampons, near the end of your period when the flow is light.
- Always wash your hands before you put in a new tampon.