The Women's Natural Health Clinic
16 Bridle Lane, St Margaret's,
Twickenham TW1 3EE

Appointments: 020 3811 8778
enquiries@womensnaturalhealthclinic.com
womensnaturalhealthclinic.com

Understanding Your Menstrual Cycle

Trevor A. Wing MBRCP FRCHM MBAcC BSc (Hons) MSc (Dist) DMed (Img)

Overview

Women menstruate around 500 times in their lifetime, and most women menstruate every four weeks, although some variation is normal. How much do you know about your menstrual cycle? Knowing when your cycle is normal means you will easily identify any issues and can seek help early. The following is designed to help you learn more about this wonder of nature.

Your menstrual cycle

Menstruation is your body's natural act of cleaning. Each month your body lines your uterus with a rich layer of blood vessels, tissue and cells in preparation for a new life to start. While this is happening in the first half of your cycle, your ovaries start to ripen many eggs, selecting the best one for conception. If there is no sperm in your fallopian tubes to fertilise that egg, your uterus sheds its lining and the cycle starts again. This is commonly called a period. Your first period comes with puberty, normally between 11 and 14 years old, and is called the menarche. You can then become pregnant. Your last period will normally be between 49 and 52 years old and is called the menopause, after which you can no longer become pregnant naturally.

Your menstrual cycle is regulated by the complex interaction of pituitary hormones (luteinising hormone and follicle-stimulating hormone) and ovarian sex hormones (oestrogen and progesterone). It can be viewed in three phases: menses (your period), follicular (building the uterine lining and ripening an egg) and luteal (awaiting a fertilised egg implanting in the uterine lining).

In the follicular phase, follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH), produced by the small pituitary gland at the base of your brain, encourages eggs (carried in follicles) in your ovaries to ripen and produce oestrogen, which nourishes and thickens the uterine lining (endometrium). At the peak of the follicular phase, when oestrogen peaks, luteinising hormone (LH) rises and takes over control. The surge in LH causes the egg follicle to rupture, usually within the following 12 to 24 hours (ovulation), releasing the selected egg into one of your fallopian tubes. Progesterone then rises rapidly, supplied by the ruptured follicle (now called the corpus luteum), and controls the last phase of your cycle. If your egg is fertilised and implantation takes place around 7 to 9 days after ovulation, progesterone remains high and pregnancy is established. If fertilisation does not occur, your progesterone level falls rapidly and menstruation begins.

How does understanding your cycle help you?

If you are one of the lucky women with problem-free cycles, you can still improve your overall reproductive health by becoming more aware of how your cycle functions and which changes show a normal cycle or signs of something that needs attention. You can also use these changing signs as a form of birth control or to improve your chances of conception. This is called natural family planning (NFP) when used to avoid pregnancy and the fertility awareness method (FAM) when used to increase the chances of pregnancy. It can also be used to enhance the effectiveness of other methods of contraception.

These signs (cervical mucus, basal body temperature and the position of the cervix) can also be used to identify a healthy or abnormal cycle and assess your fertility. When you chart these changes together with mood swings, libido, food cravings and the quantity, colour and

consistency of your menstrual flow, you gain important knowledge of how your body changes throughout your cycle.

Bringing your monthly charts to appointments is extremely helpful for your healthcare practitioner. The information gives a clear picture of your reproductive health and allows you to ask informed questions, improving your health in the long run.

Healthy menstruation is more than treating PMS or period pain. It is understanding and honouring your unique monthly cycle. By combining this knowledge with a healthy lifestyle and, when needed, natural treatments, you can learn to tune into your own menstrual rhythm.

When to seek help

It is not unusual to experience problems with your periods from time to time. Seek help if you have any of the following, as they are not normal:

- Severe cramping pain in your lower abdomen during the first day or two of your period (dysmenorrhoea)
- Irritability, food cravings and mood swings for 1 to 7 days before your period (premenstrual syndrome, PMS) that are more than mild
- Very heavy flow
- Irregular, scanty or clotted bleeding, or no periods at all
- Bleeding between periods or after sex

There is no need to suffer these unpleasant symptoms; they are all signs that your reproductive system needs attention. Conventional medical treatment consists of medication and surgery. Natural medical treatment is a very effective, gentle way to treat most of these problems and includes herbal medicine, diet and lifestyle changes and sometimes acupuncture.

Find out more on our Natural Family Planning and Painful Periods pages at womensnaturalhealthclinic.com.

Our female healthcare philosophy

At the Women's Natural Health Clinic, we specialise in comprehensive natural reproductive, gynaecological, obstetric and general healthcare for women from adolescence to post-menopause. We integrate oriental and western medical diagnosis to create a naturally oriented treatment plan combining herbal medicine, naturopathic medicine, acupuncture, nutritional therapy, exercise and lifestyle, tailored to each woman.

To book an appointment, visit womensnaturalhealthclinic.com/book or call 020 3811 8778.