



When is it safe to have sex?

When a woman starts to menstruate (have periods), she enters her reproductive years and can become pregnant. Menarche refers to the beginning of the menstruation, or the first menstrual period. This occurs during puberty but may not signify the beginning of full adult fertility because ovulation may be irregular or absent for sometime. For almost all women, understanding the miracle of reproduction is fascinating. Understanding the complex changes of the menstrual cycle is an important self-help exercise women should practice to protect their health.

It is important to understand the biology of the female reproductive system, before we can learn how to manage what is going on within ourselves. The illustration on the right is helpful in understanding the complexity of our internal organs and their functions.

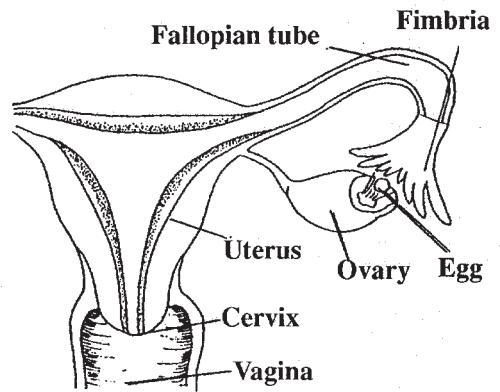
What is a menstrual cycle?

The normal menstrual cycle ranges from 21-35 days (beginning at the end of one period to the first day of starting of the second period). In a typical 28 day cycle, the day menstrual bleeding or menstruation starts is called "day one" of the cycle. Menstrual bleeding typically lasts for 2-5 days. Ovulation or the release of the egg from the ovary occurs on about day 14 of the typical 28 day cycle. Falling levels of estrogen and progesterone in the absence of pregnancy causes sloughing of the lining of the uterus or the endometrium, which results in the menstrual period.

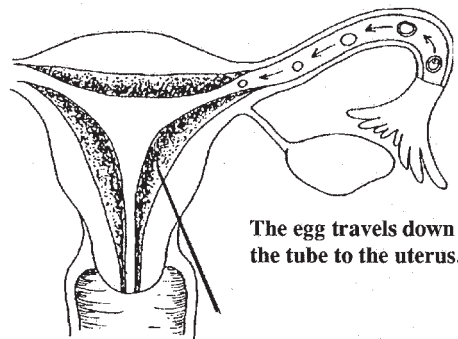
However, the typical menstrual cycle described above varies for every woman, as it is unique to the physiological changes in the body of every individual. It also depends upon the nutrition, level of physical activity, weight and many other unique characteristics of a particular individual.

To learn the length of your fertile period, the best way to

THE PROCESS OF MENSTRUATION

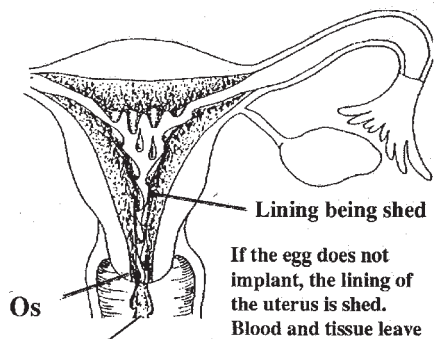


Ovulation
An egg is released from the ovary



The egg travels down the tube to the uterus.

Thickened uterine lining, ready for implantation of a fertilized egg.



Lining being shed
If the egg does not implant, the lining of the uterus is shed. Blood and tissue leave the uterus through the vagina.

From "Changing bodies, changing lives" pg. 31.

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go is to notice the duration of your menstrual cycle, rather than depending upon the numbers given in any book or brochure. The given information is to be used as guidelines or as a rule of thumb, rather than thinking of it as a definite pattern with no variances.

When during the menstrual cycle am I most fertile (most capable of getting pregnant)?

Fertility awareness is important not only to regulate your reproductive capability, but also to understand your own body.

Reproductive ability is closely related to the menstrual cycle of the female. It depends mostly on the timing of the ovulation (release of an egg from the ovaries). In a typical 28 day cycle, ovulation occurs on the 14th day in the middle of the cycle. The egg is viable for about 2 days and the sperms 2-7 days. The egg travels down the fallopian tubes, and it is here that fertilization occurs. If the egg is not fertilized then it does not implant, and the associated tissue is sloughed off from the uterus.

So it is during the time right before ovulation, and right after it that a woman is at the greatest risk of pregnancy. However, this is not always the case. Women vary greatly in their timing of ovulation, and it is in their best interest to know when they will do so. There are three commonly used techniques, which are sometimes called natural family planning methods:

Calendar method:

A woman keeps a calendar of her menstrual cycles. After 6-12 months, she subtracts 18 days from the length of her shortest cycle, which gives her the day of earliest possible ovulation. Then she subtracts 11 days from the length of her longest cycle, which gives her the day of latest possible ovulation. Thus the two numbers together mark the longest period of fertility each month.

Basal Body Temperature Method:

With a special thermometer, a woman keeps a daily log of her basal body temperature (the lowest body temperature of a healthy person during waking hours). When the temperature drops slightly for 24 to 48 hours, a woman is just about to or currently ovulating, and thus her chances of conceiving are at their highest.

Mucus Method:

A woman keeps track of the changes in her vaginal mucus. When her vaginal mucus changes from its usual thick consistency to a thin watery consistency, this is a sign that she is ovulating.

Although these techniques of fertility awareness may seem complicated, they can help women to better know their bodies and help them become pregnant or avoid pregnancy.

How can I prevent getting pregnant?

The best method available for preventing pregnancy is abstinence; however, other techniques like contraceptive devices can prevent pregnancy if used properly. To find what method of birth control is best for you, consult a physician, a nurse practitioner or health educator in Student Health Services.



Taking care of your health is **YOUR** responsibility. If you have any other questions, or if you want to discuss any issue, feel free to talk to your Health Educator, or the Family Planning Nurse Practitioners at Student Health Services.

Call (909) 869-4000 for an appointment.

REFERENCES:

1. Ruth, B., *Changing Bodies, Changing Lives*, Vintage Books, New York, 1988.
2. *The New Our Bodies, Ourselves*, Touchstone Books, 1992.