

# PERIODS

what you need to know



All girls and women will start their periods at some time.  
This booklet tells you what to do when you start having them too.

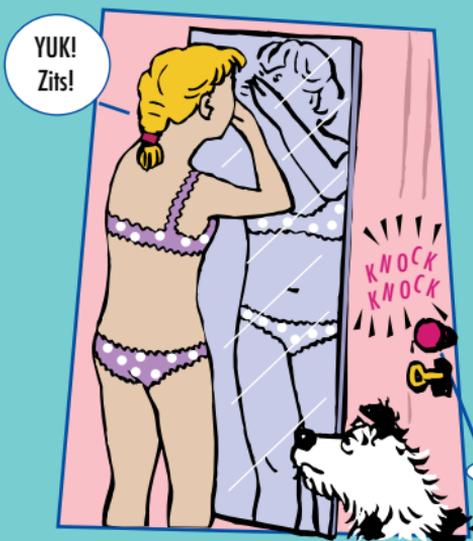
# What & why

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

A period is bleeding through a girl's or woman's vagina (va-ji-nah) that lasts for a few days.

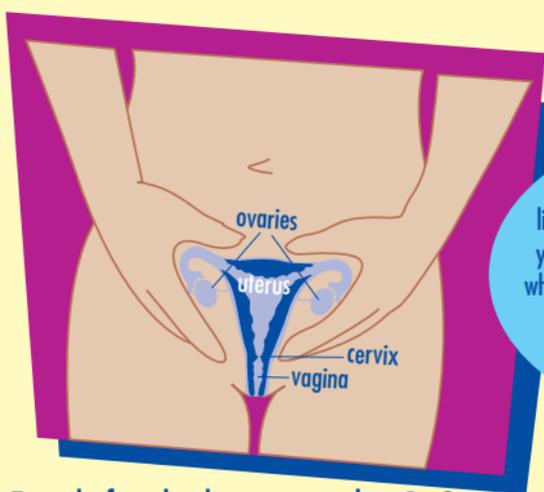
**Q** When will my periods start?  
eight years old?  12 years old?   
18 years old?

**A** Usually when you are between 11 and 15 but you could be anything from eight to 18. Your periods will start when your body is ready. You can't make them start or stop them from starting.



The changes to do with growing up are called **puberty** (pew-ber-tee). 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.

What's she **DOING** in there?



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** (you-ter-us) are inside your body, and how much space they take up. The uterus is also called the **womb** (woom).

Even before birth, a woman has 1–2 million tiny eggs in her **ovaries** (over-ees). When you reach puberty usually one egg is released every month from your ovaries (**ovulation**). The egg is tiny — much smaller than in the diagrams on this page. The egg moves along the **fallopian** (fa-low-pe-an) tube to your uterus. The uterus is where a baby would grow if the egg were **fertilised** (fur-ti-lized) by sperm from a man.

1. Every month, an egg leaves the ovary ...



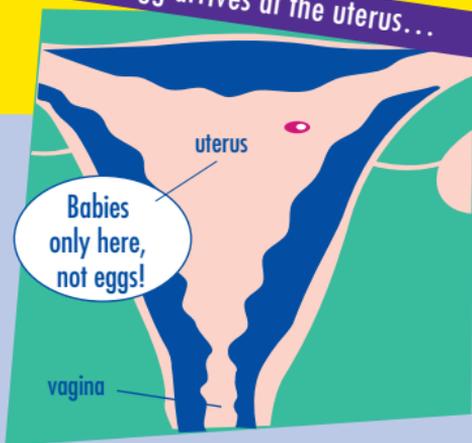
2. ... and travels down the fallopian tube ...



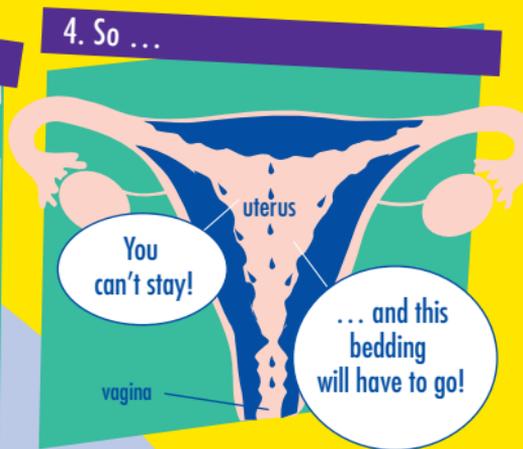
I need to meet a sperm!

Your uterus gets ready for a possible pregnancy each month and its lining becomes thick and soft. If an egg is not fertilised and does not 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.

### 3. The egg arrives at the uterus...



### 4. So ...



The time between the first day of one period and the day before the start of the next is called the **menstrual cycle** (men-stroo-al sy-kal). People often talk about having a monthly or 28 day cycle, but many girls have a cycle that is 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. ”

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

**Q** How long will I have periods for?

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

**Q** Will I know when my period is 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.

**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 is only about 3–5 tablespoons. It's unlikely to be a sudden gush of blood that will take you by surprise. You will 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 will have your period. After a while your periods should become more regular. You can then use a diary to work out when your period is due.

**Q** How long will my period last?

**A** Some girls may bleed for around 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 for up to seven days.



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

# What to do

“ 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 either sanitary towels or tampons to collect the blood. Towels soak up the blood as it leaves your body and tampons fit inside your vagina and absorb the blood before it leaves your body. One method isn't better than the other. It's for you to decide which you find easiest and most comfortable to use. Some women may choose to use a menstrual cup or sponge.



There are many types of sanitary towel ...

panty liner

regular

and SUPER!

YOU CAN USE US for the first couple of days when you bleed more heavily ...

... and you can use me at the very end of your period.

At your service!

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.



We're very easy to use because you can see when you need to change us ...

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



Many toilets have special bins for this ...

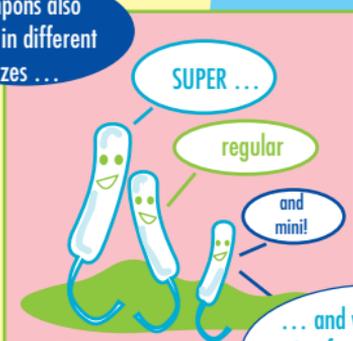


Hey! Is there a bin in yours?

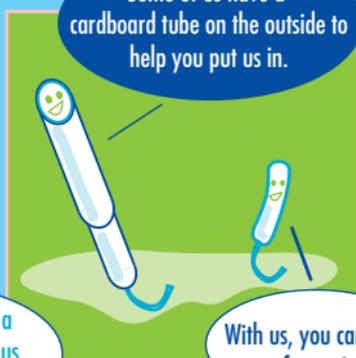
... but if there isn't a bin, wrap the towel in toilet paper and put it in the nearest bin you can find.

Finding the towel you prefer will help you feel comfortable.

Tampons also come in different sizes ...



Some of us have a cardboard 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!

Before you put a tampon\* in, you need to find your vagina.



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

\*Mini or slender tampons are easiest for girls first starting to use tampons.

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

★ The string won't break. It is joined firmly to the tampon.

A tampon cannot 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?

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

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

★ 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?

★ 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 are having a period.



Should I use tampons or towels? Everyone says different things.



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

**Q** Will I still be a virgin if I use tampons?

**A** Yes. You are a virgin until you have sex.



I don't think it's a good idea for young girls to use tampons – they should get used to having periods first.



My sister prefers to use towels.



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

You can see that people are different and the choice is up to you!

**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.

**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.**

**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 are expensive.

# be prepared

“ 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. ”

**Q** What do boys know about periods?

★ Often not a lot! They may know something from sex and relationships 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.



Huh! You're just scared that if you don't laugh at me, your friends will laugh at you!

It's a good idea to have some towels or tampons 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 towel or tampon you can use. At school, you can often get one from the school nurse or secretary's office or ask any woman teacher. They are very used to being asked — you will not be the first.

If you haven't got a towel or tampon, use toilet paper in your pants until you can get hold of one.

Your mother, father or carer may buy towels or tampons for you, or you may buy them yourself. You can buy them at pharmacies and supermarkets. You may feel awkward or shy about buying them, but other people won't notice. Just put them in with the rest of the shopping.

**Q**

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

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

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 are 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 often helps period pain. You may bleed more heavily when you exercise so it's a good idea to change your towel or tampon before you start any exercise. If you wear a tampon you can go swimming as the blood is held inside you.

“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.”

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.



## WORDSEARCH Find the following words:

body fertile fun baby well blood help egg ask flow comfort  
period towel ovulate change sex month sport safe confident  
protect woman

B E C O N F I D E N T  
F F H E L P W T F R O  
E M A G S E X L F O W  
R O N G E R C S U R E  
T N G F W I G A N P L  
I T E L C O M F O R T  
L H R O B D A E S O W  
E L N W O V U L A T E  
B L O O D I F Y S E L  
H B A B Y Q E J K C L  
W O M A N S P O R T N

## WORDPLAY

Some of the slang words for periods are:

the curse   monthlies   time of the month   being on   coming on

'Don't believe it!'

There are lots of silly stories about periods such as:

- you are unclean when you have your period
- everybody knows when you have a period
- you shouldn't wash your hair if you have a period.

'They're not true!'

Confused? If you've got other questions about periods that your parents, carers, teachers or school nurse can't help you with, you can ring fpa on 0845 122 8690 Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm.



The sexual health charity FPA.

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## WORDCHECK

**PUBERTY** The time when your body starts to change from a girl's to a woman's.

**OVARY** Your body has two of these. 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** The entrance to the uterus.

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

**PERIOD** Bleeding from the uterus through the vagina, lasting 3–8 days.

### MENSTRUATION

Another word for period.

### MENSTRUAL CYCLE

The time from the beginning of one period to the beginning of the next.

**MENOPAUSE** When your periods stop, usually when you are around 50.