



What's Your Period Trying to Tell You?

An expert decodes your monthly visit

Problem: Heavy or lengthy menstruation

WHAT IT MEANS: Usually a hormonal imbalance or fibroids (non-cancerous growths on the uterus) result in periods that soak one or more tampons in an hour or last longer than a week. Other causes range from your birth control to endometrial cancer. So see your gyno, stat. "A heavy flow is serious and shouldn't be ignored," says Linda Bradley, M.D., director of Cleveland Clinic Foundation's Center for Menstrual Disorders, Fibroids and Hysteroscopic Services.

Problem: Multiple visits during the month

WHAT IT MEANS: Stress or an underactive thyroid could be the reason you get your period more than once a month, but the most likely culprit is weight. "Women who are obese may have a hormonal imbalance that can lead to more frequent periods," explains Bradley.

Problem: Missed period

WHAT IT MEANS: Are pregnancy and menopause out of the question? Stress, being over- or underweight, or excessive exercise could be the reason. Simple lifestyle changes will likely get you back on track.

Problem: Spotting between periods

WHAT IT MEANS: "Surprisingly, spotting during ovulation is normal in up to 30 percent of women not on birth control," says Bradley. For the other 70 percent, your birth control or an infection may be the cause.

Problem: Extreme pain or discomfort

WHAT IT MEANS: If a painkiller doesn't do the trick, you could have endometriosis (a condition in which tissue that usually grows inside the uterus grows outside of it) or fibroids—though ovarian cysts and even the use of an IUD have been found to bring pain as well. Your doctor can help you pinpoint the issue and address your concerns. —CLAIRE SULMERS

“Women who are obese may have a hormonal imbalance that can lead to more frequent periods.”

HANDLE WITH CARE

3 things you should stop doing right now to avoid infections

1 DON'T SLEEP IN YOUR UNDERWEAR. Unless you're wearing a pad or are concerned about discharge, there's no reason to wear panties to bed. Doing so can trap moisture, especially for heavier women, creating an environment where infection and odor can breed. Give your vagina a chance to breathe at night by wearing loose boxers or nothing at all.

2 DITCH DOUCHING. It kills off healthy bacteria, allowing the bad kind to take over, which can lead to bacterial vaginosis and yeast infections. The inside of your vagina is self-cleaning. As for the outside, stick to gentle, fragrance-free soap and water to keep yourself feeling and smelling fresh.

3 SKIP THONGS. Because they rub back and forth against your urethra and anus, thongs can move bacteria forward toward the vagina and increase your risk of infection. Break them out only for special occasions; otherwise, stick to more traditional styles in cotton.

—JENNIFER ABBASI

SOURCES: Allahna Coggins, M.D., an ob-gyn at Port Royal Medical Center, Beaufort, South Carolina; Lisa Masterson, M.D., an ob-gyn in Santa Monica, California.