



MID-JERSEY PEDIATRICS

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MENSTRUAL PERIODS

Teenagers go through many changes during puberty. A girl's breasts begin to grow--sometimes as early as age 8--and pubic hair will appear at the same time. Puberty is also the time that girls have their first menstrual period. Like many girls, you may be curious about what to expect. This information will help you understand your periods and answer questions you might have.

Why do girls have periods?

During puberty, chemical messengers called hormones signal your ovaries to make estrogen and other types of hormones that cause your uterus to grow. The hormone levels change during each month causing the lining of your uterus to grow and get thicker. When it gets to a certain thickness, the lining sheds into the vagina. This is a menstrual period. It contains blood and a lot of cells. Once your period is over, the lining begins growing thicker again and the cycle starts over.

When do girls have their first period?

Because people grow and develop at different rates, some girls will have their first period at age 10, while others won't have one until they are 16. Both can be normal. If you haven't had a period yet and are concerned about it, it might help to talk with your parents, a health teacher, or your pediatrician.

How often do girls have their periods?

During the first year or two, your periods may be irregular. You may go for several months without one. This is normal. Your body is adjusting to all the changes taking place. Once it has adjusted, you should have a period every 3 to 6 weeks. Not every woman has a period once each month.

How much blood flow is normal?

Most periods last from 3 to 5 days. But they may be as short as 1 day or as long as 7 days and still be normal. Most of the flow occurs on the second and third day, and then gets lighter. Sometimes it stops and starts for several days until it's over. Most women use about 10 to 15 saturated pads or tampons per period. It can still be normal to use up to 24.

What kind of symptoms can occur?

Many girls have pain during their period. Doctors call this dysmenorrhea, but it's more commonly known as "cramps". For many, cramps may be accompanied by: feeling sick to your stomach or vomiting, headaches, feeling flushed, diarrhea, and/or dizziness. Most women can get relief for the cramps. Over-the-counter ibuprofen will usually be enough. Try 400 mg. (2 tablets) every 6 hours. Other products such as Midol, Pamprin, Aleve or acetaminophen may also be tried. Good nutrition, exercise, and a heating pad or hot water bottle on your lower abdomen can reduce discomfort. If your cramps don't improve, your pediatrician may prescribe other medication.

What will the doctor want to know?

Remember you can talk with your pediatrician in confidence. Your doctor will ask: your age when you had your first period, how often you have periods and how long they last (writing this on personal calendar is helpful), how many pads or tampons you use each period, the date of your last two periods, any symptoms you have with your periods, such as cramps and things that have helped with cramps, whether you are sexually active, if you use birth control and if you take any other medicine or drugs.

What is PMS?

PMS or premenstrual syndrome is a group of feelings or physical changes that some adolescents and women have about a week before a period. Some of the symptoms are: increased acne, feeling tired, feeling bloated, increased appetite, weight gain, breast soreness, mood swings, headaches, constipation, and/or feeling irritable.

What can be done for PMS?

Keep track of your periods. Sometimes it's easier to make sense of different feelings when you realize you are experiencing PMS. Get enough rest and exercise regularly. Drink less caffeine (colas, coffee, tea, chocolate). Reduce stress wherever possible.