NATIONWIDE CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL℠

700 Children's Drive
Columbus, Ohio 43205-2696
nationwidechildrens.org

MENSTRUATION
(Menstrual Period)

Menstruation (men-stroo-AY-shun) is a very normal and natural part of growing up and becoming a woman. Your body is going through many physical and emotional changes right now, and menstruation is just one part of these changes.

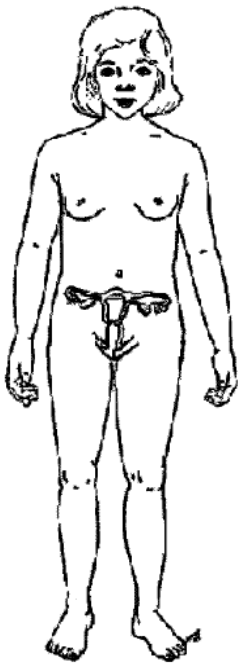
WHEN MENSTRUATION STARTS

Sometime between the ages of 6 and 12, your body will begin to change. Your breasts will begin to enlarge and hair will grow in your pubic area (groin) and under your arms. Within 2 to 4 years after these changes have started, you may have your first menstrual period.

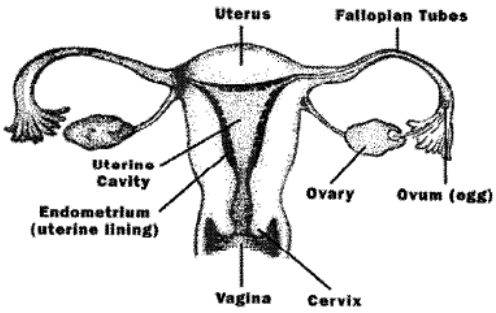
HOW IT ALL HAPPENS

There are some definite changes **inside** a girl's body, too. Several of the body's organs play a part in the monthly menstrual cycle (Picture 1):

- Every month the **pituitary** (pi-TEW-i-terr-ee) **gland** at the base of the brain releases hormones into the bloodstream. These hormones are chemicals which send a signal to one of the ovaries. The ovary then sends out a tiny egg.
- Both **ovaries** contain thousands of tiny eggs. Every month an egg is released from one of the ovaries (Picture 2).
- The egg travels through one of the **fallopian** (fuh-LO-pee-un) **tubes** to the uterus.
- The **uterus** (YOO-tur-us) is a hollow organ behind your bladder (Picture 1). It thickens each month with a blood-filled lining. If the egg has not been fertilized (joined by a sperm from a male), this lining is shed, and passes out of the body through the vagina. This happens once each month and lasts 3 to 7 days.
- The **vagina** (vuh-JYE-nuh) is the passageway between the uterus and the outside of the body.



Picture 1 The reproductive organs inside the body.



Picture 2 An egg goes from the ovary through the fallopian tube to the uterus.

Copyright 1980-2000, Nationwide Children's Hospital

WHAT YOUR PERIOD WILL BE LIKE

The most important thing to remember is that your periods will have their own special pattern. The time between periods, the amount of menstrual flow, and the number of days the period lasts are different for each person. **This is why it is a good idea to keep track of your own menstrual pattern by marking down the days of your period on a calendar each month.** Usually, a period lasts from 3 to 7 days. The time between the start of one period and the start of the next one can be 21-40 days. When you first start having periods, they may be irregular (not occur every month) or you may just have spotting.

Sometimes you may feel tired, irritable, or sad. You may feel bloated and notice a lack of energy. You may have soreness in your breasts, or feel some cramping in your lower abdomen. These are normal reactions to the changes in the amount of hormones in your blood.

HOW TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

- You may use either sanitary napkins (pads) or tampons to absorb the menstrual flow during your period. You should change them at least 4 times a day. It is best not to use deodorant pads or deodorant tampons because they may irritate the vaginal area. If you normally use tampons during your period, **use a pad at night**. This will reduce the chance of getting an infection called **Toxic Shock Syndrome**.
- Avoid feminine hygiene products such as sprays, douches, and deodorant powders. Some of these perfumed products may irritate your vagina.
- Always carry a spare sanitary napkin with you in case you start your period unexpectedly.
- It is good to take a daily bath or shower and to shampoo your hair during your period. Using underarm deodorant is also important to help prevent body odors. Personal hygiene is important all the time, not just during your period.
- You may participate in all your usual activities.
- You should wear a tampon if you plan to swim during your period.

WHEN TO CALL THE DOCTOR

Call your doctor if any of the following occurs:

- **If you are using a tampon and develop a fever over 101°F, headache, vomiting, and diarrhea, remove the tampon and call your doctor immediately.**
- If you have severe cramping or pain with your period.
- If you have a high fever over 101° F.
- If you have regular cycles and suddenly begin spotting frequently.
- If you have regular cycles and miss more than 2 periods.
- If you are sexually active, have regular cycles, and miss a period.
- If you soak through more than 1 pad every 2 hours for more than 2 days.
- If you have heavy periods lasting more than 10 to 14 days.
- If you have uncomfortable cramps that prevent you from taking part in your usual activities, talk with your doctor about medicines that may be helpful.

If you have any questions, be sure to ask you doctor or nurse, or call the Adolescent Health Center at (614) 722-2450.