The Menstrual Cycle as a Vital Sign

RHNTC
REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH
NATIONAL TRAINING CENTER

The menstrual cycle provides valuable insight into a woman's health across her lifespan. Irregular, very heavy, very painful, or troubling periods may signal underlying health problems.

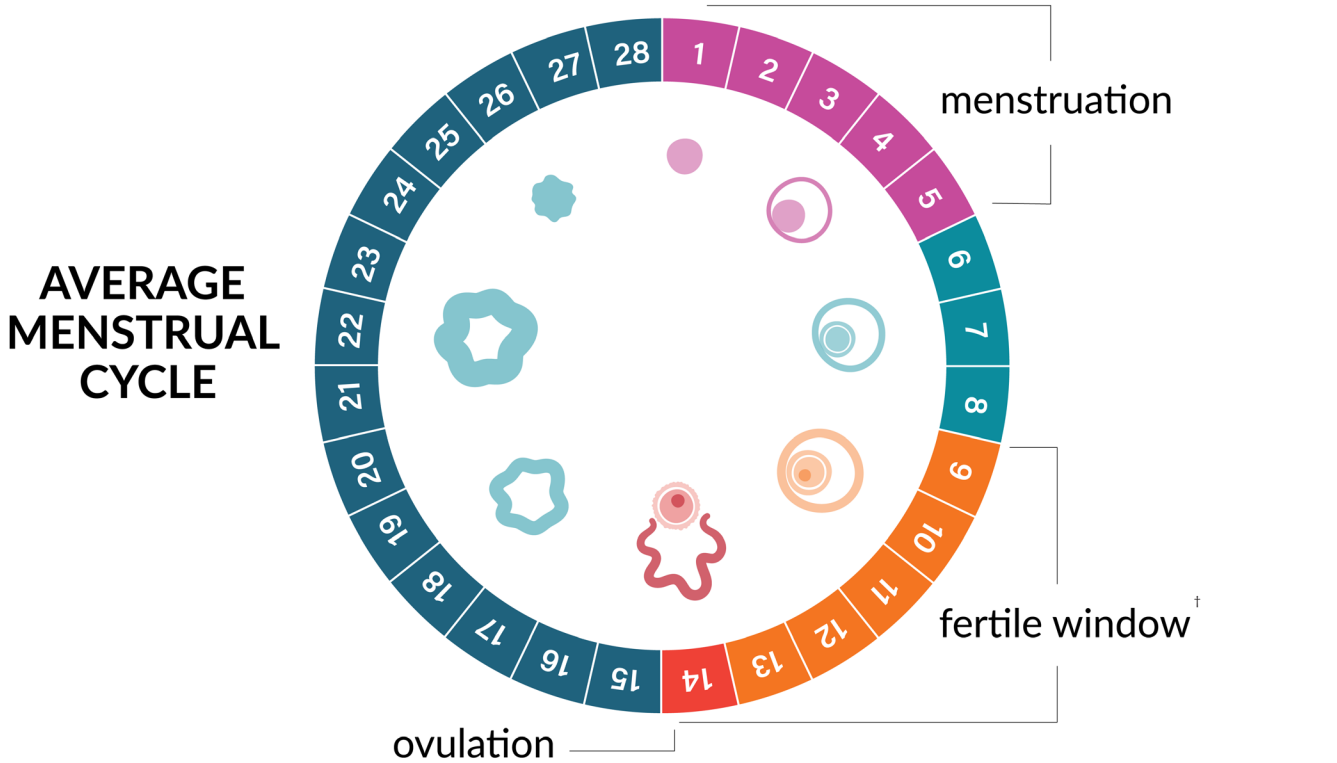
Ask about and assess further if your patient has periods that are…

Period signal	What it might look like	Potential associated health conditions
Irregular	• More than every 38 days • Less than every 24 days • No period for 3 months in a row • Bleeding for longer than 8 days	Can be associated with structural abnormalities such as endometriosis, fibroids and polyps, infection, or (rarely) malignancy. Non-structural causes include bleeding disorders, ovulatory dysfunction, and hormonal or endocrine disorders, including polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), thyroid dysfunction, and perimenopause.
Very heavy	• Soaks a pad or tampon every 1–2 hours • Blood clots larger than a golf ball • Feels dizzy, lightheaded, weak, or tired • Has chest pain or trouble breathing	Can be associated with bleeding disorders, endometriosis, PCOS, thyroid dysfunction, uterine polyps, fibroids, anemia, or (rarely) malignancy.
Very painful	• Hard to go about activities of daily living	Can be associated with endometriosis, fibroids, PCOS, and ovarian cysts.
Troubling mentally or emotionally	• Big mood swings • Significant irritability • Sadness, despair, or thoughts of suicide • Anxiety or panic attacks • Difficulty focusing or sleeping	Can be symptoms of premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD).

Partnering with women to support menstrual cycle tracking—like with digital tools, also known as "femtech"—can help them recognize patterns and better understand their bodies. Tracking can also produce information that helps providers evaluate and manage underlying health conditions earlier and more effectively.

This publication was supported by the Office of Population Affairs (Grant FPTPA006030). The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the Department of Health and Human Services; nor does mention of trade names, commercial practices, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

Help Your Patients Understand Their Menstrual Cycles



† The fertile window lasts about six days within days 8–19 of the menstrual cycle—often on days 9–14, but not always. Therefore, individuals using the menstrual cycle as a fertility indicator should consider days 8–19 as the fertile window.

Counseling points

- **Menstruation:** Day 1 of the menstrual cycle is the first day of menstrual bleeding. An average menstrual cycle lasts 26–32 days, though cycle lengths vary. (The graphic of the Average Menstrual Cycle above uses a 28-day cycle as an example.)
- **Ovulation:** The release of an egg cell in a female is called ovulation. Ovulation typically occurs around days 12–16 of the menstrual cycle (about two weeks after one's menstrual period).
- **Fertile window:** While the egg is viable for up to one day, the fertile window (time during which sex can lead to pregnancy) lasts about six days: the day of ovulation and the five days beforehand. This is because sperm can live in the genital tract for three to five days. Therefore, even if a client has sex a few days before they ovulate, the sperm could still fertilize the egg and result in a pregnancy.
- **Hormones:** Hormone (e.g., estrogen and progesterone) levels change throughout the menstrual cycle and cause menstrual symptoms.
- **Bleeding:** On average, a woman loses about two to three tablespoons of blood over the course of her period.
- **Irregular cycles:** Patients who are postpartum, are approaching menopause, or have hormonal imbalances or other health conditions may have irregular cycles.

For more information:

Committee on Menstrual Disorders and Related Health Impacts (FIGO)
Management of Acute Abnormal Uterine Bleeding in Nonpregnant Reproductive-Aged Women (ACOG)