



The Menstrual Cycle

A menstrual cycle begins on the first day of a period and ends the day before the next period begins. For any woman, no two menstrual cycles are necessarily identical and most women will experience variation in the length of cycles throughout their reproductive lives. Normal cycle length is between 24 and 35 days. Day one of a cycle is considered the day of 'established' bleeding. Some women have one or two days of spotting or very light bleeding before bleeding becomes 'established'.

When does ovulation occur?

Female fertility depends on ovulation, which is the release of an egg from one of the ovaries. Ovulation usually occurs every month, about two weeks before the next period starts. Ovulation means that a single egg, which has ripened in the ovary, is released so it may travel down the fallopian tube to the uterus (womb).

The time of ovulation is most accurately predicted by the amount of a hormone called 'lutenising hormone' (LH) in the blood. In most cycles, the level of this hormone suddenly increases (this is called the LH surge), causing the egg to be released from the ovary approximately 36 hours later.

What are the symptoms of ovulation?

Usually, signs of ovulation can be observed during the cycle. Mucous produced by the lower part of the womb (cervix) may be discharged from the vagina. This mucous, which allows sperm to survive and move inside the womb towards the egg, changes in consistency throughout the cycle.

A few days before ovulation, the mucous becomes clear and stretchy, sometimes appearing like raw egg white and usually producing a slippery, wet sensation. This is called 'fertile type' mucous. The last day of this clearer, wet, slippery mucous is just before ovulation. Many women experience other symptoms such as left or right sided lower abdominal pain, increased libido, backache or breast tenderness. Occasionally, there may be mid-cycle bleeding or spotting. The symptoms which most accurately indicate ovulation, mucous discharge and lower abdominal pain, are not experienced by every fertile woman.

What is the fertile period of a menstrual cycle?

A pregnancy can occur when a mature or ripened egg is fertilised by sperm in the fallopian tube. Once it has been released from the ovary, the egg survives for about 24 hours. Sperm may survive in a fertile-type mucous for several days. When the mucous is not fertile, sperm do not survive. Therefore, the fertile time of each cycle is short. To increase the chance of becoming pregnant, a woman should have intercourse at least once in the two or three days before the time of ovulation, particularly when the 'fertile type' mucous is observed.

If a man's sperm count is low, he can increase the chance of pregnancy by having intercourse once only, just before his wife ovulates. Frequent intercourse before this



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time may reduce the number of sperm he is able to deliver on the right day. Ovulation is followed by a menstrual period about 13 days later if pregnancy has not occurred.

The bleeding of a period is caused by the shedding of the lining of the womb. The interval between ovulation and a period is usually constant, however in certain circumstances it can vary in length, from 11 to 17 days. The interval from the beginning of a period until ovulation is quite variable so that predicting the day of ovulation by counting the number of days from the beginning of a cycle may be inaccurate.