

Chapter 22

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How to use this chapter:

Most of the problems in this chapter are described more fully in other parts of this book. If you are worried about bleeding from your vagina, look it up in this chapter and then turn to the other suggested pages in the book for more information. If the problem is not covered in this book, see a health worker trained to do pelvic exams.

Abnormal Bleeding from the Vagina



It is normal for *menstrual periods* to change from time to time because of illness, stress, pregnancy, breastfeeding, a long journey, overwork, or a change in diet. But if your menstrual periods change suddenly, or the changes last more than a few months or are unusual or uncomfortable in some other way, it may be a sign of a more serious problem.

► If your menstrual period changes suddenly or stops, check if you are pregnant—even if you have been using a family planning method.

Danger signs

Heavy bleeding is usually an emergency and can lead to shock, which can be deadly (see page 254). Get medical help for unusually heavy bleeding from the vagina or:

- bleeding from the vagina with missed menstrual period and pain in the abdomen. This could be a tubal pregnancy (see page 73).
- bleeding from the vagina late in pregnancy (see page 74).
- heavy bleeding from the vagina that is unexpected or that comes after birth (see page 92), *miscarriage* (see page 98), or *abortion* (see page 251).



menstrual periods



pregnancy

Abnormal Menstrual Bleeding

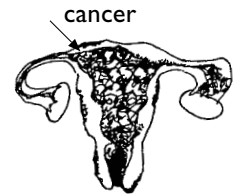
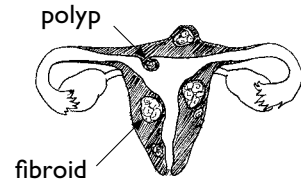
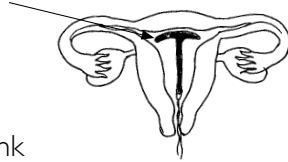
MENSTRUAL PERIODS WITH HEAVY BLEEDING

Periods with heavy bleeding are uncomfortable and having them often can lead to *anemia* (see page 172). Signs include:

- The menstrual flow soaks through your pad, cloth, or tampon every hour for several hours in a row.
- Menstrual periods last more than a week.
- Blood clots (dark red shiny lumps) larger than 2½ cm (1 inch).
- Heavy flow stops you from going places or doing what you usually do.

Possible causes of heavy bleeding include:

- changes in the *hormones* that control your menstrual cycle (see page 47), more likely if you just started having menstrual periods, were pregnant or stopped breastfeeding recently, or are close to *menopause*.
- an *intrauterine device (IUD)*
- *miscarriage*, even if you did not think you were pregnant (see page 98).
- a problem with your *thyroid gland*.
- growths that are not cancer (*fibroids* or *polyps*, see page 380) or cancer in your *womb* (see page 381).



IMPORTANT See a health worker trained to do pelvic exams for:

- *pain along with the bleeding*
- *periods with heavy bleeding for 3 months or more*
- *bleeding while it is possible you might be pregnant*

For any of the danger signs on page 359 or severe pain, get medical help quickly.

MENSTRUAL PERIODS WITH LIGHT BLEEDING

Light bleeding each month is not a health problem itself but may be a sign of a medical problem.

Possible causes:

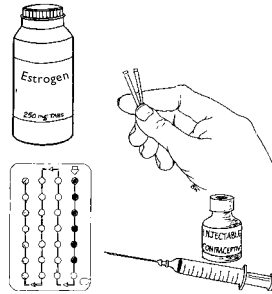
- Hormonal methods of family planning can make your periods lighter after you have been using them for a while. See pages 207 to 215.
- A problem with your thyroid gland.

MENSTRUAL PERIODS THAT COME TOO OFTEN OR BLEEDING AT OTHER TIMES

Your menstrual cycles will not always be regular (see page 50). But if your cycle was regular and has changed, or if your periods come more often than every 3 weeks, see a health worker.

Possible causes:

- growths in the womb that are not cancer (fibroids or polyps, see page 380) or cancer in the womb (see page 381).
- taking *estrogen*, a hormonal medicine, after menopause (see page 124).
- family planning methods that can make periods come more often or cause bleeding between periods. See Chapter 13, “Family Planning.”



MENSTRUAL PERIODS THAT COME TOO FAR APART OR HAVE STOPPED

Menstrual periods usually come about every 21 to 35 days, though some people have periods less often. But if your period is later than usual or does not come at all, you may be pregnant (see page 67) or have a serious medical problem. See a health worker.

Possible causes:

- miscarriage, even if you did not think you were pregnant (see page 98).
- changes in the hormones that control the menstrual cycle (see page 47).
- some illnesses, including tuberculosis or HIV.
- nearing menopause, if you are 45 or older (see page 124).
- family planning methods can make periods come less often or stop completely (see Chapter 13, “Family Planning”).
- not getting enough healthy food to eat.
- polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) (see page 51).

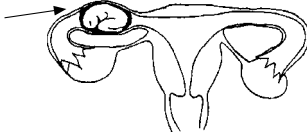
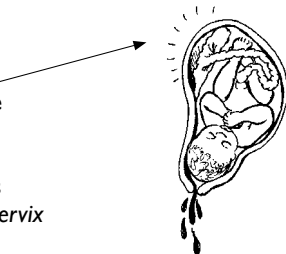


► Hormonal family planning methods, such as pills, implants, or injections, can change your menstrual periods in different ways (see pages 207 to 215).

► Most people have their first menstrual period between ages 10 to 16. Not getting enough to eat and some illnesses can delay this. If you are over 16 and your periods haven't started, talk to a health worker.

Other Bleeding from the Vagina

BLEEDING DURING PREGNANCY OR AFTER BIRTH

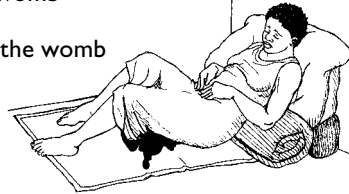
Spotting or light bleeding during the first 3 months of pregnancy is common. If there is no pain, this is usually not harmful to the pregnancy. But light bleeding can sometimes be a sign of early miscarriage (see page 98). When bleeding is heavy or for the problems described in this chart, medical help is needed.

Bleeding problem	May be caused by...	What to do	See page
Bleeding during the first 3 months of pregnancy with constant pain or pain that comes and goes	<p><i>pregnancy in the tube</i></p> 	URGENT! Go to a hospital right away.	73
Bleeding any time during the last 3 months of pregnancy	<p>the afterbirth (<i>placenta</i>) is coming off the wall of the womb</p> <p>the placenta is covering the cervix</p> 	URGENT! Go to a hospital right away.	74
Bleeding during the first 6 months of pregnancy	<p>may be a miscarriage (especially if you also have <i>cramping</i>)</p> 	Watch and wait. If bleeding becomes heavy, go to a hospital.	98
Bleeding during or just after birth that does not stop within one day (24 hours), or soaks through 2 pads or cloths in an hour	<p>the placenta will not come out</p> <p>pieces of the placenta are left in the womb</p> <p>the womb will not contract (become hard)</p> 	URGENT! See a midwife or go to a hospital.	92

BLEEDING AFTER AN ABORTION OR MISCARRIAGE

It is normal to have bleeding like a light menstrual period for as long as 2 weeks after an abortion and spotting for 4 to 6 weeks, until your menstrual period returns. But if bleeding is heavy, get medical help.

Bleeding problem	May be caused by...	What to do	See page
Bleeding that soaks more than 2 pads or cloths in an hour for 2 hours in a row, bleeding with dizziness, or blood clots larger than an orange	pieces of the pregnancy still in the womb	URGENT! Go to a hospital right away.	251
	infection in the womb		255



BLEEDING AFTER SEX

Bleeding problem	May be caused by...	What to do	See page
Bleeding during or after sex	a sexually transmitted infection (STI)	See "gonorrhea and chlamydia."	268
	pelvic inflammatory disease (PID)	See "PID."	276
	forced sex	See "rape."	327
	cancer of the cervix or the womb, or growths that are not cancer	See "cancer of the cervix" and "problems of the womb."	377 380

BLEEDING AFTER MENOPAUSE

Bleeding problem	May be caused by...	What to do	See page
Bleeding after menopause (after not having menstrual periods for 12 months)	growths in the womb or on the cervix that are not cancer	See a health worker trained to do a pelvic exam. Growths can often be removed and there are ways to test for cancer.	377 to 381
	cancer of the cervix or in the womb		

