REPRODUCTIVE AGING AND MIDLIFE
Sex Hormones in the Female Body

Estrogen and progesterone are the primary female reproductive hormones, and are typically produced in the ovaries. These two hormones play critical roles in sexual development and reproductive health throughout a woman’s life – from first menstruation, through child-bearing years, and into midlife.

As a woman gets older, typically in her late 40s and 50s, there can be large fluctuations and an eventual decline in the production of estrogen from her ovaries, causing changes in her menstrual cycle and body. On average, this menopause transition (also known as perimenopause) can last about 4 years until the production of these hormones eventually stops, along with her menstrual cycles, resulting in menopause.

A woman has reached menopause when her menstrual period has stopped for 12 consecutive months.

Well Woman Exams

A woman’s wellness visit with a primary care provider or gynecologist is recommended once a year. During these visits, the health care provider may ask questions about your health and medical history, including asking about your menstrual cycle and sexual activity. Routine tests and screenings, such as a breast exam, pelvic exam, HPV test and/or mammogram may be performed.

Regular wellness exams with your health care provider are important opportunities to enhance your overall health. They can help you prepare for your next stage in life, offer essential preventive care education and procedures, and can help diagnose certain medical conditions early, making sure you get the treatment you need for any health issues.

Preventive health screenings recommended for postmenopausal women include:

- Mammogram every 1-2 years
- HPV test for cervical cancer every 5 years
- Colonoscopy every 10 years

Discuss with your health care provider your individual risk for certain health conditions that may adjust the frequency of your screening schedule.

As you enter the menopause transition, wellness exams offer a great opportunity to discuss any new symptoms or concerns with your health care provider. Women do not always recognize signs or symptoms of the menopause transition, so it is important to ask.

Visit the Talking to Your Health Care Provider section of the SWHR Menopause Preparedness Toolkit for additional tips and questions to ask during your well woman exams.
MENSTRUAL HEALTH

During a woman’s reproductive years, she experiences a monthly discharge of blood and uterine lining, or menstruation, also known as a period.

Many women typically experience a period monthly – every 21 to 35 days – with bleeding that lasts 2 to 7 days. While a “normal” period is not the same for every person, you likely have an idea of what is typical for you.

Keeping a Period Diary
Tracking your menstrual cycle is a good way to figure out what is “normal” for you, and as you enter the menopause transition, it may help you identify changes in your period or accompanying symptoms. There are a variety of applications that can assist you in tracking your cycles. Sharing your period diary with your health care provider can give them a more complete picture of your cycles, any accompanying symptoms, their severity, and their impact on your daily life.

What to Track:
- Start and end date
- Flow — heaviness, changes from usual, how often you change menstrual products
- Cramping/pelvic pain, including severity and impact on ability to function
- Irregular bleeding or spotting between periods
- Late or missed periods
- Gastrointestinal symptoms such as constipation or diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, or pain with urination or bowel movements
- Any changes related to other symptoms like headaches and mood or sleep disturbances

Example Period Tracking Apps:
- Clue
- Eve
- Flo
- Period Tracker Period Calendar (App Store or Google Play)
- Spot On

There are many health apps to choose from. The Federal Trade Commission provides guidance to consumers on how to select and use health apps while reducing privacy risks.