

REPRODUCTIVE AGING AND MIDLIFE

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REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH ACROSS THE LIFESPAN

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 on average 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 months in a row**, without intervention (e.g., contraceptives) and remains that way for the rest of her life.

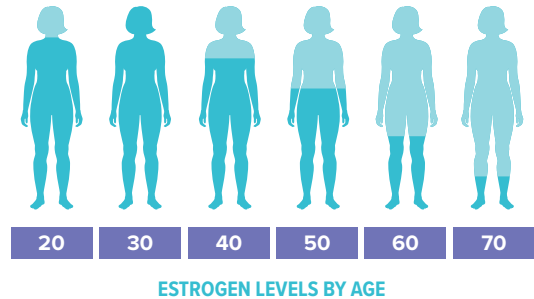


1/3 of a woman's life in developed countries is spent beyond menopause¹

Preventive health screenings recommended for women include:

- Mammogram every 1-2 years, starting at 40 years
- HPV test for cervical cancer every 5 years, starting at 30 years
- Colonoscopy every 10 years, starting at 45 years
- DEXA (Dual-Energy X-ray Absorptiometry) scan every 2-5 years, starting at 65 years

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



Menopause is a naturally occurring life stage for all women after a certain age. However, some individuals may experience early menopause (younger than age 45). If younger than age 40, menopause is considered premature. Early and premature menopause may result from factors that damage the ovaries or reduce estrogen production, though in up to half of women with early or premature menopause, no direct cause is identified.

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 help diagnose certain medical conditions early, making sure you get the treatment you need for any health issues.

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.



800 million people
menstruate each day²

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.



It is not uncommon for your period to change over the years. Cycles are typically longer and more irregular in younger women, but might become shorter and more consistent as you get older. As you approach menopause, cycle irregularity can increase due to ovarian hormone fluctuations.

If you are starting to notice that your periods are becoming heavier (e.g., clots, or changing your pad more than twice in an hour), are closer together (more than two cycles in a month), or cramping more than usual, be sure to contact your health care provider.

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

Period tracking can be done through apps that can be found on the App Store, Google Play, or created using your own digital calendars and notes applications.

Some individuals may find period and health tracking apps a helpful tool in tracking their menstrual health information. Always check the privacy settings and data sharing parameters of the apps you are using.

The Federal Trade Commission provides [guidance to consumers](#) on how to select and use health apps while reducing privacy risks.