

What is irregular bleeding?

Irregular vaginal bleeding is any bleeding from a woman's vagina that is not part of a regular period.

A normal menstrual cycle

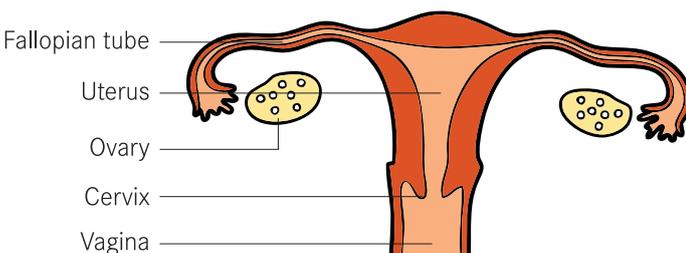
Normally, during each monthly cycle (*menstrual cycle*), the lining of the *uterus* (womb) gets thicker in preparation for pregnancy. A *menstruation* (period) occurs when a pregnancy has not taken place. The lining of the womb is shed and blood loss occurs. After each period the cycle starts again.

The amount and duration of bleeding differs from woman to woman and sometimes from month to month. Some women have light periods while others experience heavy bleeding.

A period can last from three days to 10 days and occur every three to six weeks. This pattern can vary with age, stress, diet, exercise and inherited factors.

The flow can also vary. Around 40 ml (two tablespoons) of fluid is lost, which the body quickly replaces.

It is common for women to have cramping pain with their period. This is felt just below the navel, and may spread into the legs or lower back. It can be felt as a dull ache or sharp twinge. During a period it is also common to feel bloated and heavy, get more pimples, feel tense and emotional, have sore breasts and hair that is greasier.



What causes irregular bleeding?

In many women, the cause of the bleeding is not found. For others, the cause depends on their age and the site of the bleeding. Once pregnancy has been ruled out, there are several known causes.

- Hormonal changes.
- Contraception – the pill, contraceptive injections or implants or an intrauterine device (IUD).
- Infection in the vagina or uterus.
- *Fibroids* or *polyps* – these can form inside the uterus or cervix and cause vaginal bleeding.

- Trauma to the vagina.
- Pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) can cause abnormal vaginal bleeding, pain and fever.
- Medication, such as anti-coagulants (*blood thinners*) or anti-epilepsy drugs.
- Underlying health problems, such as a bleeding disorder or thyroid disorder.
- Cancer in the lining of the uterus, cervix or vagina (this is rare).
- Atrophic vaginitis, in which the lining of the vagina is inflamed due to low levels of the hormone oestrogen in post-menopausal women.

The cause of the bleeding may be obvious from your medical history. Sometimes tests may be needed to find a diagnosis.

- Physical (vaginal) examination.
- Cervical smear and swabs (PAP smear).
- Pregnancy test.
- Blood tests may be required if excessive bleeding has happened.
- Ultrasound – if abnormalities are found, you may need a biopsy to investigate further.
- Additional hormone tests may be necessary.

Treatment

The possible treatment of vaginal bleeding depends on the cause of the bleeding.

- Anti-inflammatory medication – such as *ibuprofen*, *mefenamic acid* and *naproxen*.
- Antibiotics.
- Change of contraception, including changing your oral contraceptive pill.
- Hormone therapy.
- Anti-bleeding agents – such as *tranexamic acid*.
- Surgery.
- Treating any underlying health problems.

Home care

If you have irregular bleeding, several things can help.

- Get plenty of sleep.
- Eat a well balanced diet.
- Do some gentle exercise.
- Keep a diary of your symptoms to show your doctor.

If your bleeding is painful, the following techniques may help.

- Rest. Curl your knees up to your chest and lie on your side.
- Place a warm pack, such as a hot water bottle wrapped in a towel or wheat bag on your abdomen.
- Take a warm bath.
- Avoid tight clothing.
- Exercise.
- Rub or massage where it hurts.
- Take painkillers such as paracetamol, *Panadeine* (paracetamol and codeine) or anti-inflammatory medications (such as ibuprofen) if pain is severe. Avoid aspirin.
- Try relaxation techniques.
- Consider magnesium or Vitamin B1.

Follow up

You may be referred to a specialist doctor (*gynaecologist*) for further treatment. If pain or bleeding persists see your doctor.

Notes:

Seeking help



In a **medical emergency** go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).



If you have ongoing bleeding problems see your local doctor or health care professional.

If you are passing more than a pad of blood every two hours, you should seek medical help.



For health advice from a Registered Nurse you can call **NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day** on **1300 60 60 24** for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to **interpreting services** for callers not confident with English. Call **1300 60 60 24**.

*Calls from mobile calls may be charged at a higher rate



Want to know more?

- Ask your local doctor or health care professional.
- Visit the **Better Health Channel**
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

If you would like to receive this publication in an **accessible format**, please phone 9096 0578 or email edfactsheets@health.vic.gov.au



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