

Live Well to
Learn Well

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health.cornell.edu

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Appointments:
Monday–Saturday

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information

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A menstrual ‘period,’ or menstruation, refers to the monthly bleeding that occurs when a body sheds the lining of the uterus. Menstrual cycles are measured from the first day of one period to the first day of the next. While the average length of a cycle is 28-29 days, they vary. A normal period can range from 21-35 days in length, with bleeding typically lasting 2-7 days.

Missing a period or experiencing occasional irregularity in your menstrual cycle is not uncommon, and is not necessarily a sign that something is wrong.

However, ongoing absent or irregular periods can be a sign of an underlying health condition, and should be addressed with a medical provider.

Types of irregular periods

Amenorrhea (specifically, ‘secondary amenorrhea’) is the medical term for the absence of a person’s period for three or more months. (By comparison, ‘primary amenorrhea’ is when a person with a uterus does not begin menstruating by age 15.)

Oligomenorrhea is the medical term for infrequent, lighter, or shorter periods. It is defined as a menstrual cycle lasting longer than 35 days, or having only 4-9 (as opposed to the typical 12-13) periods in a year.

Causes

Causes of amenorrhea and oligomenorrhea among college students can include:

- Pregnancy
- Changes in birth control
- Significant weight loss or gain
- Extreme exercise routines
- Stress
- Certain medications
- Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS)
- Other conditions elevating testosterone levels
- Overproduction of the hormone prolactin
- Thyroid or adrenal gland disorders
- Structural problems in the reproductive tract
- Chronic illness

Amenorrhea and oligomenorrhea are not in themselves dangerous, but can be symptoms of an underlying health condition, or a sign that your body is going through too much physical or emotional stress.

If left untreated, some conditions that cause amenorrhea and oligomenorrhea can affect fertility and increase the risk of developing reproductive, cardiovascular, bone, or metabolic problems.



Ongoing absent or irregular periods can be a sign of a treatable health condition, and should be addressed with a medical provider.

When to see a medical provider

Some variation in your period is normal. But if you’re experiencing ongoing amenorrhea or oligomenorrhea, it’s important to see a medical provider.

Depending on your symptoms and medical history, your provider may perform a physical exam, order lab testing, and consider other testing to determine what’s causing the menstrual irregularity and what treatment is appropriate.

Appointments at Cornell Health

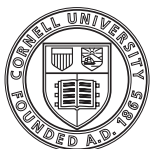
To schedule a medical appointment at Cornell Health, log in to myCornellHealth from any page of health.cornell.edu, or call us at 607-255-5155 during business hours.

Treatment

Most causes of amenorrhea and oligomenorrhea are treatable. Depending on the diagnosis, treatment may include lifestyle modifications, hormonal therapy, and/or medications.

Pregnancy

Pregnancy typically results in a cessation of periods. However, it is also possible for people who are experiencing amenorrhea or oligomenorrhea to become pregnant. If you are sexually active and do not want to become pregnant, you will still need to use birth control to prevent pregnancy. If you wish to become pregnant, you may benefit from prescription hormonal medication to help you conceive.



More information

To find more detailed information about amenorrhea and oligomenorrhea, we recommend the following articles from the Cleveland Clinic.

More about
amenorrhea:



More about
oligomenorrhea:

