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## Female Athlete Education.

# THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE: THE BASICS

### Defining the terms:

**Menarche:** The **first occurrence of menstruation** (aka your first ever period!).

**Menstrual cycle:** A fairly predictable, and repeating, **cycle of changes in sex hormones** (such as oestrogen and progesterone) making pregnancy possible. Day one of your cycle begins on the first day of your period and runs until the day before your next period!

**Period (menstruation/menses):** **Shedding of the endometrial lining** (of the uterus) through the vagina, if the egg released at ovulation is not fertilised.

**Ovulation:** The **release of an egg(s) from the ovary** (usually this occurs at the midpoint of each menstrual cycle).

### What's normal?

**Reminder:** The menstrual cycle is **highly individual**, but there are some **common characteristics**:



**Cycle length:**  
between **21 and 35**  
days (21 to 40 days for  
teens).



**Period length:**  
between **2 to 7 days**.



**Period blood flow:**  
shouldn't be **excessive**  
or **interfere** with your  
quality of life.



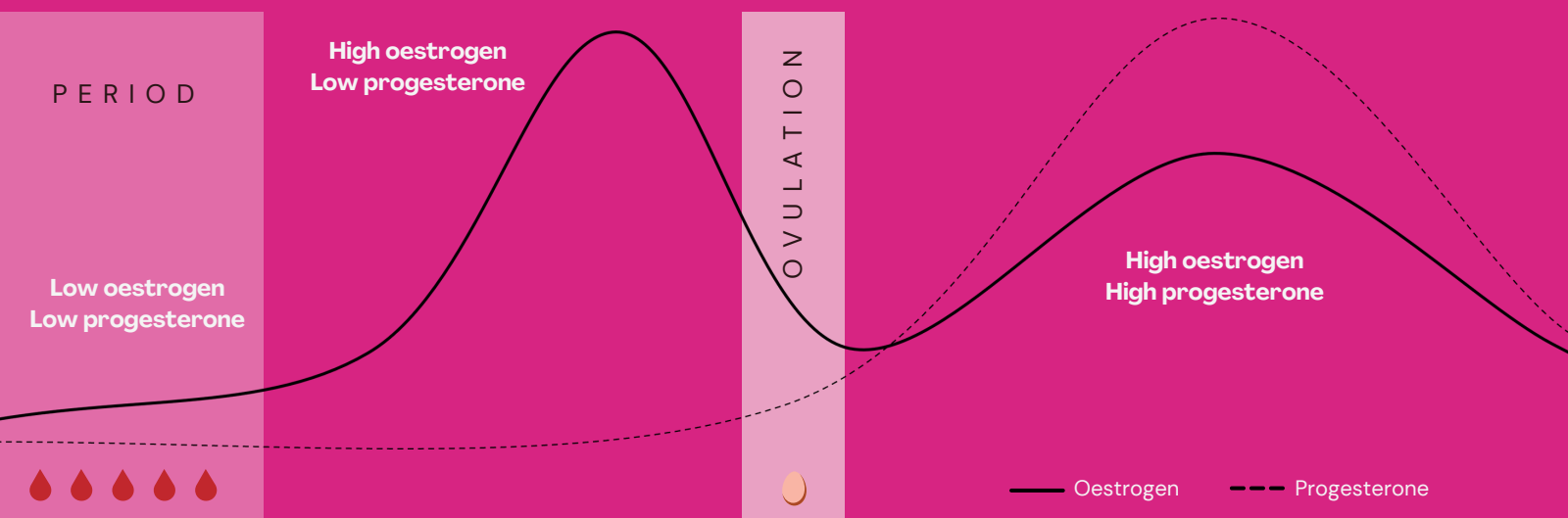
**First period age:**  
between **9 and 15**  
years old.

### The menstrual cycle:

The menstrual cycle is controlled by the **hypothalamic, pituitary, ovarian axis** (or HPO axis for short). Whilst there are many hormones involved in controlling the menstrual cycle (e.g., GnRH, FSH, & LH), the **two main hormones** that we're interested in are **oestrogen and progesterone**.

FOLLICULAR PHASE

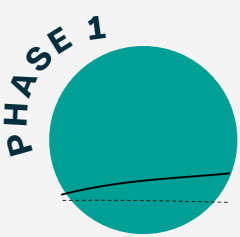
LUTEAL PHASE



The above diagram represents the fluctuations in sex hormones across a textbook 28-day cycle. Please note we're not all textbooks and only 13% of women have a 28-day cycle!

### The phases:

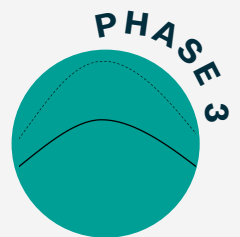
The varying concentrations and ratios of oestrogen and progesterone across the menstrual cycle give the cycle its **four main phases**:



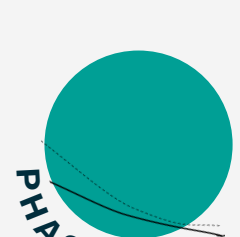
**PHASE 1**  
Menstruation occurs. Oestrogen and progesterone concentrations are **at their lowest**.



**PHASE 2**  
**Oestrogen rises whilst progesterone remains low.** Eventually, oestrogen reaches its peak just prior to ovulation before it begins to decline.



**PHASE 3**  
**Progesterone starts to rise** after ovulation and reaches its peak at the mid-point of the luteal phase. **Oestrogen also has a secondary peak** at this time.



**PHASE 4**  
If pregnancy does not occur, **both oestrogen and progesterone begin to decline.** Because the endometrium is no longer supported, it begins to shed and a new cycle begins.

### When to get help?

Speak to your doctor/GP:

- If you haven't started your first period by **age 15**.
- If you have **missed three or more consecutive periods** when your periods were previously regular.
- Period pain/other symptoms that **stop you from performing day-to-day activities or training**.
- **Heavy menstrual bleeding** (e.g., needing to change a super pad or tampon every 2 hours, flooding, large clots, interferes with your quality of life) or **abnormal bleeding** between periods/after sex.
- If you think you're **pregnant**.
- If you have any **questions** about your menstrual cycle/notice a **change** in your 'normal' cycle.

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