



Menstrual Wellness

Volume I

By Sabriya Saif



masakhone



Let's Go Over the Basics!

What is your period? Menstruation (or the period) marks the start of puberty and is actually only one part of a complex hormonal, emotional, and bodily cycle that happens every month, which is the menstrual cycle. Understanding the menstrual cycle can help people understand their sexuality, their body, and their mind for the rest of their life. Some people get periods. Others don't.

If a person never had a vagina and a uterus, or did once, they are not going to be having periods. If someone does have those body parts, they're usually going to be experiencing periods, and for around 40 years. But some people with a uterus can still not have periods, or don't always have them, or once did and don't anymore. This can be due to certain medications, surgeries or wellness conditions, age, or the use of certain methods of birth control that either lessen periods on their own.

Some people who have periods are women, but not all. Some people who have periods are transgender men, genderqueer people, agender folks, non-binary people, etc.

Having a period can be a stressful experience for some trans folks because it's a reminder that their bodies don't match their true gender. This discomfort and anxiety is called gender dysphoria.



Even More Basics!

Other trans people might not be too bothered by their periods. Either reaction is normal and okay. Sometimes trans people who haven't reached puberty yet take hormones (called puberty blockers) to prevent all of the gendered body changes that happen during puberty, including periods.

And people who already get periods can use certain types of birth control that help lighten or stop their periods. Hormone replacement therapy, like taking testosterone, may also stop your period. If you start taking testosterone, your period will often go away within a few months. But this is reversible — if you stop taking testosterone, your period will most likely come back.

There can be some changes in your menstrual cycle before it stops for good. If you experience gender dysphoria when you get your period, know that you're not alone. It may be helpful to check out trans-specific community spaces and/or find a trans affirming doctor in your area that you can talk to.



The Menstrual Cycle

What is the menstrual cycle?

The menstrual cycle helps your body prepare for pregnancy every month.

It also makes you have a period if you're not pregnant.

Your menstrual cycle is controlled by hormones like estrogen and progesterone.

Here's how it all goes down: You have 2 ovaries, and each one holds a bunch of eggs.

Hormones make the eggs mature and the egg is ready to get fertilized.


This means it's ready to combine with the sperm to start pregnancy.



The hormones also make the lining of your uterus thick and spongy.

So if your egg does get fertilized, it has a nice cushy place to land and start a pregnancy. This lining is made of tissue and blood, and has lots of nutrients to help a pregnancy grow. If pregnancy doesn't happen, your body doesn't need the thick lining in your uterus. Your lining breaks down, and the blood, nutrients, and tissue flow out of your body through your vagina.

Voilà, it's your period!



Most people get their first period between ages 12 and 14, but some people get them earlier or later than that. There's no way to know exactly when you'll get it. If you don't get your period by the time you're 16, it's a good idea to visit a medical provider.

As for menstrual cycle regularity, it's common for the menstrual cycle to take around five years to get regular. For some people, irregularity is their normal. Regular does NOT mean cycles are the exact same number of days each time, or that a period comes on the same date each month.



A regular period just means the cycles are around the same number of days each time, with room to give or take a couple or a few days earlier or later. Some people might even find they skip a period sometimes, or have a way shorter or longer cycle seemingly out of nowhere. A late period is generally considered five days later than the latest it is expected. But – rest, activity, how and what we eat, stress, wellness changes, and even a move from one place to the next can change the regularity of your cycles and period.

END the POSTIGMA

Many people feel embarrassed when they first get periods; some never stop feeling ashamed. Much of that shame comes from the fact that still today, and through much of history, someone getting a period isn't treated very well. Women, trans folks, gender non-conforming and non-binary people, were and are not treated well, period. A lot of that attitude is based on biased ideas that people with chests and vulvas are "dirty." It is mostly rooted in sexism.

Here's a mini history lesson - before people really understood menstruation, blood of any sort meant that something was wrong with someone. That someone could have any kind of bleeding for days and not get ill or die created fear simply because no one understood WHY that could happen.

Everyone's experiences of, and feelings about, menstruation vary; even just one person within their lifetime may find they don't always feel the same way about it. As with anything else, there's no right or wrong ways to feel about your own life and body.



So, some people have outdated ideas about periods they're willingly choosing not to correct – it's not that they don't know what's real, it's that they like the lies or what they feel they do for them better – but that's not about menstruation being the bad guy. That's mostly about sexism sucking, which it always does. If this was just about fluids and hygiene, the same taboos and bad attitudes would be found in the way people treat and address semen or saliva. They're not. Mostly because: sexism.

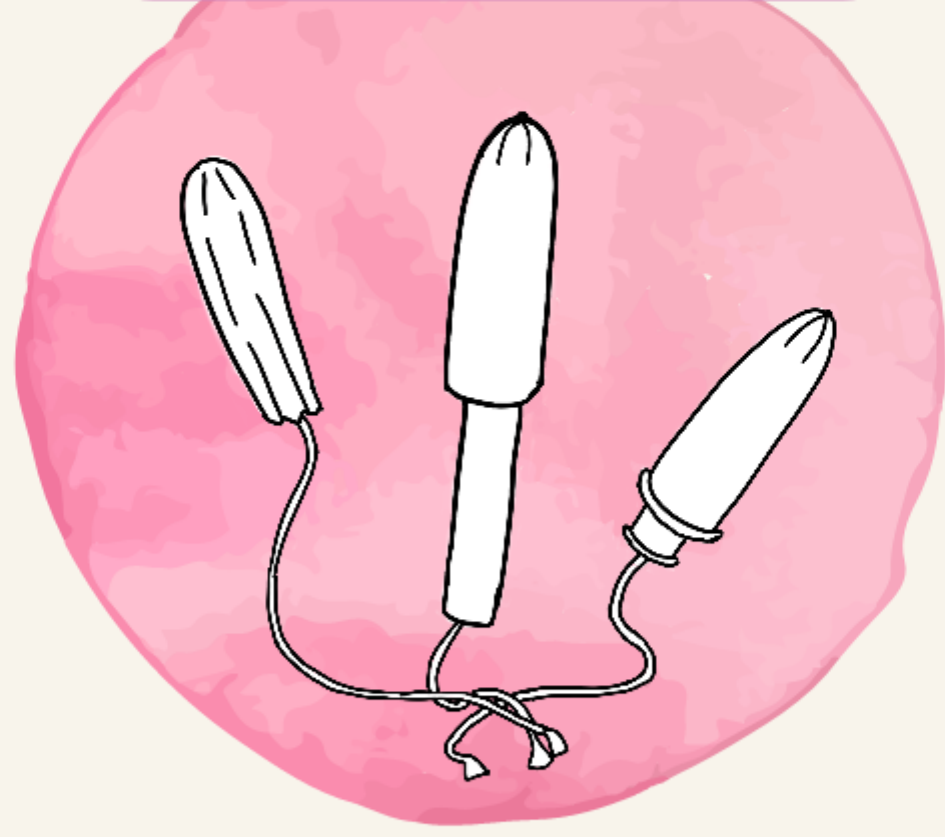
Not feeling comfortable with periods can also be about more individual feelings or life experiences, like not feeling so excited or comfortable going through puberty, having a gender that is or feels in conflict to periods, or general anxiety or fear about body functions.

Menstrual Products

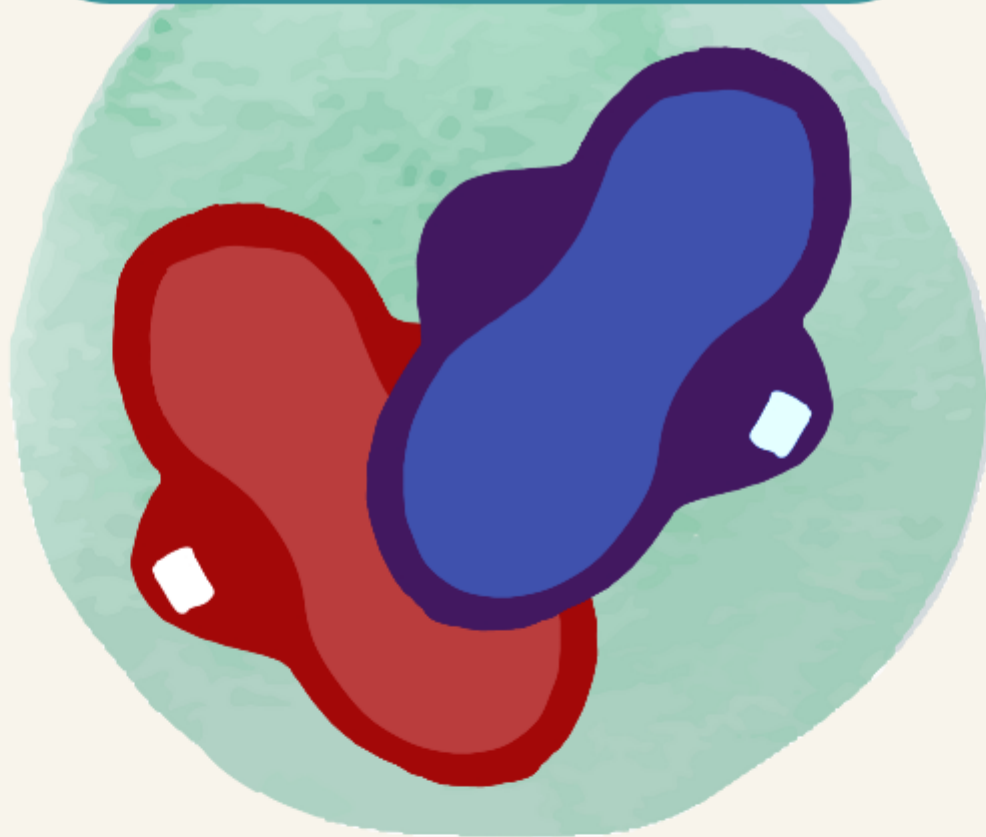
Disposable Pads



Tampons



Washable Pads



Sea Sponges



Period Underwear



Menstrual Cups



Disposable Pads



Disposable pads can often be a good choice when starting your period, if you have a heavy flow, and at night when you're sleeping. Most have a sticky backing to them to underwear. Try to avoid any that are scented, as these irritate the vulva and can upset the vagina's nourishing bacterial balance.

Don't worry too much about odor! No one is likely to smell your period unless you aren't changing their pad often enough. Even if it does smell, that's okay: it's a period, and like all of our bodies, it can have a smell.

Some people complain that pads make them feel like they're wearing a diaper. In that case, try using smaller pads and changing them more often.

You can find disposable pads at nearly any pharmacy, superstore or grocery.



Tampons! Tampons are inserted into the vagina and they aren't as scary as they might seem.

They're good to use if you're swimming, if you're active, if you have a special occasion, or if you simply prefer tampons.

Note: Be sure to buy the kind without any fragrance or perfumes!

Please be aware to change your tampons often as well.

Tampons should be changed every few hours and no longer than 8 hours, especially tampons that contain rayon fibers or bleaches.

If not changed often, there is a higher chance of getting a bacterial infection called Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS).

Make sure to only use tampons during the day, change them often and buy 100% cotton tampons.

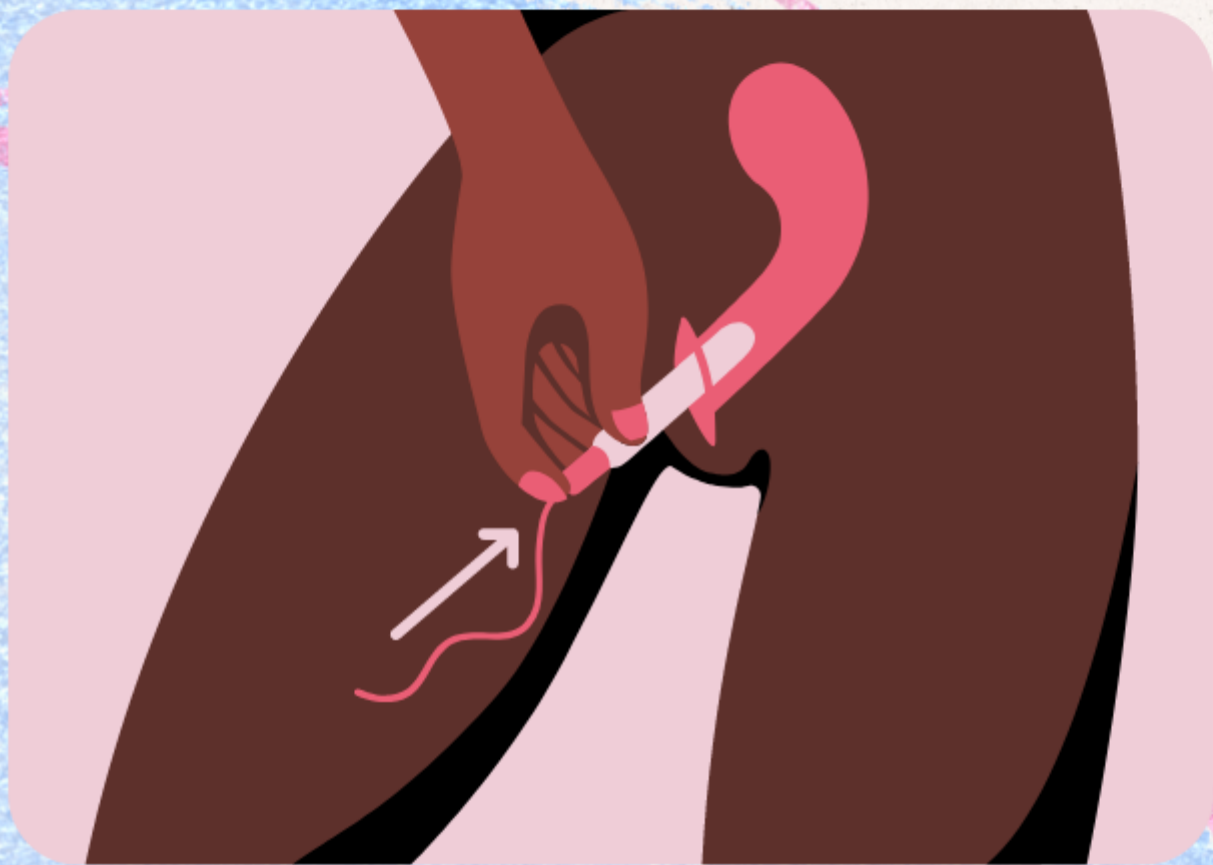
You can find tampons at nearly any pharmacy, superstore or grocery.

If you think you may not remember to change them, give yourself a reminder-- write it on a post-it note or ask someone close to you to remind you!





To put in a tampon, hold the tampon with the stringless side facing you, and guide it towards the vagina. It's easiest to sit on the toilet or squat; spreading your legs will make it easier.



If you're using a tampon without an applicator, press your finger into the bottom of it where the string is, and push the tampon up deeply into the vagina.



If you're using a tampon with an applicator, press the curved top of the applicator into the vagina, and then push the bottom of the applicator up, until it releases the tampon. Then take the applicator out, and the tampon stays in! When you need to change it, pull the string out over the toilet, and put it in the trash.




Some Things to Remember:

You do not have to worry about losing your tampon in the vagina. It is not an endless space where you can lose it in.

The vagina is a sleeve-like organ that is curved and not straight up and down. When inserting a tampon (or cup), it's easiest to do so while pushing it towards the back, not straight up.

You also do not have to worry about tampons causing you to "lose your virginity." They do not!

Remember to change your tampon every few hours, no longer than 8.



Washable Pads



Washable pads are a great choice to use during your period! They're just as sanitary as disposable pads and tampons. They're made out of cotton and totally reusable. You wash it and dry it and it's ready to use again.

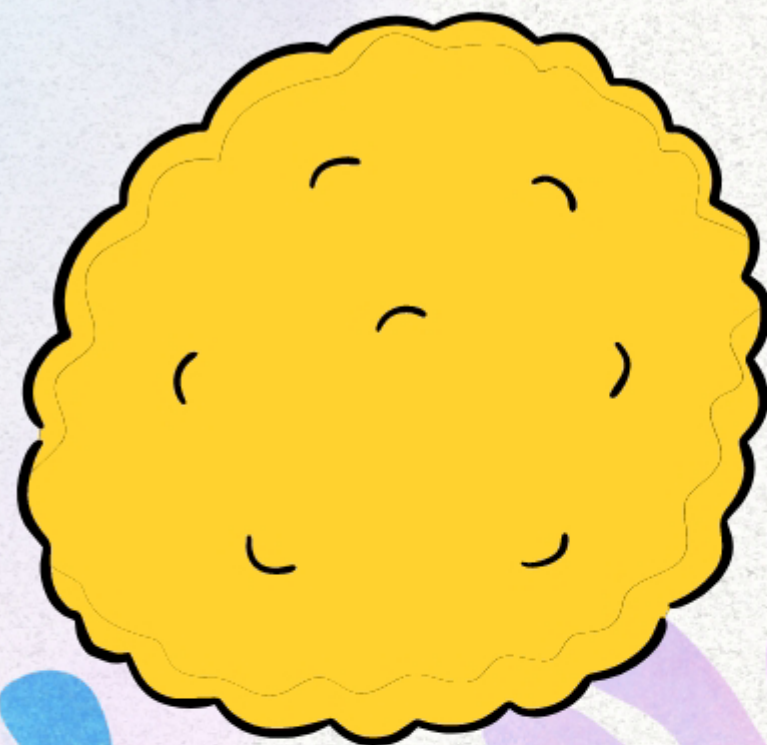
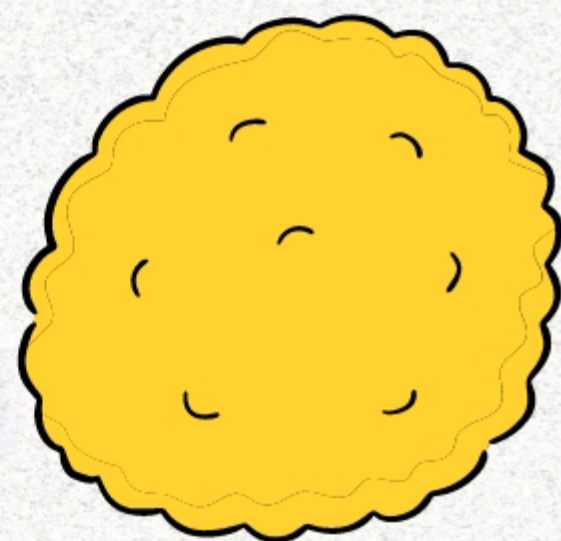
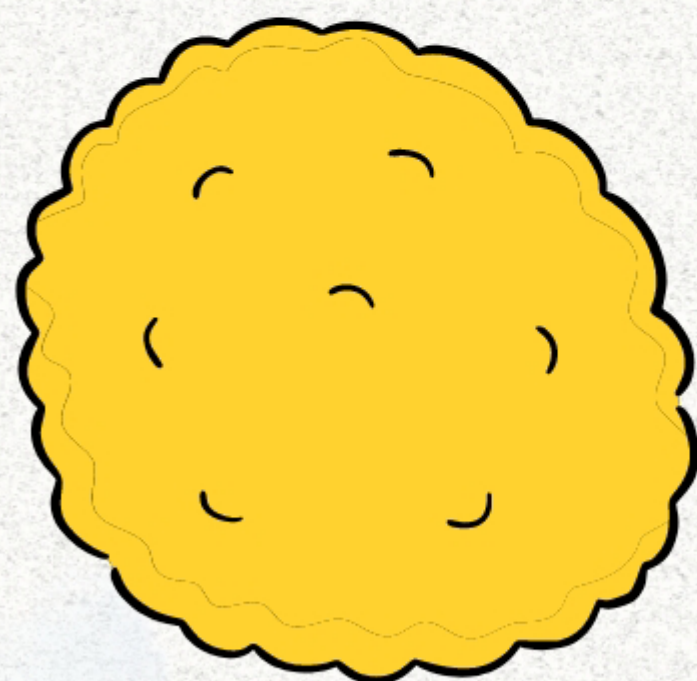
Some have snaps on the little wings that you snap around the underwear, and others attach like a pair of underwear.

You can get washable pads online, some wellness food stores, sometimes at feminist bookstores or sex toy shops.

Sea Sponges

Sea sponges are another great product to use! They're recyclable, natural, and all you do is lightly moisten it and insert it inside the vagina. To change them, just gently grab an edge, pull it out, boil it before reuse, and put in a fresh one. Sponges are also less likely to cause Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS).

But, these can't be used forever. They're good for a small amount of uses until they get smelly and fall apart a bit, so remember to grab more sponges before then. Sponges are usually found in the cosmetics section of wellness food stores or you can get them online.



Period Underwear

Period underwear is exactly what it sounds like.

It's underwear that you wear during your period, no pads or tampons required. They come in different forms: briefs, panties, boxers, bikinis, thongs; it's all up to you to decide! They work just like washable pads, except the pad is sewn into or onto the pants.

It's simple to wear: you just slip them on like regular underwear. You care for them by washing them in the laundry. If you have leaking issues, they can also be paired with menstrual cups if you use those. These tend to be on the more expensive side at first, but they don't need to be bought regularly like disposable products do.

You can get period underwear from brands like TomboyX or Aisle on their websites. You can also find them from some places that sell underwear in general. It comes in different kinds, so have fun with it!





Menstrual Cups

Menstrual cups are a great choice! Similar to tampons, menstrual cups are inserted into the vagina. Unlike tampons, cups contain the menstrual flow rather than absorb it. You also don't have to worry about the possibility of Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS) when you wear menstrual cups, so you can wear them for a longer time. Cups usually come in two sizes: for those using them who have gone through a pregnancy, and those who have not. Most cups are reusable, so you don't have to buy them as often as most disposable products. These aren't usually as easy to insert as tampons or sponges, but with a little practice, you can learn to put them in easily. Brands like Divacup, Mooncup, Keeper, Lunette and the Instead/Softcup are good choices if you want cups that are insertable and reusable. You can find them online, at some local pharmacies or wellness food stores.





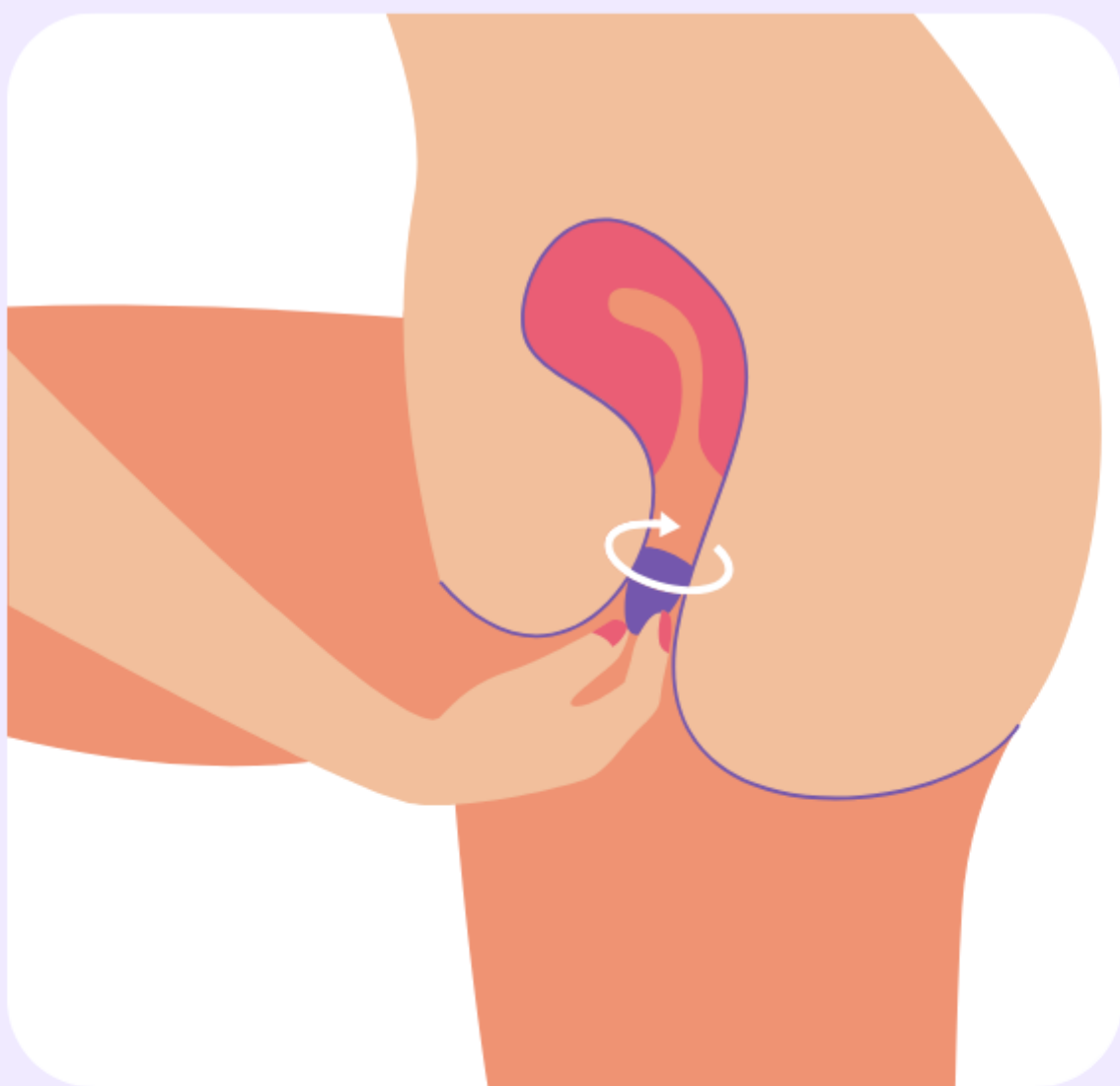
First, wash your hands with a mild, un-perfumed soap and water. When using the cup for the first time, you can lubricate it with water or a water-based lubricant to make it easier putting it into the vagina.



Fold the cup in on itself as shown in the picture. To do this squeeze the cup flat then fold it in half so that the rim makes a 'C' or 'U' shape as illustrated here.



Hold the cup firmly in its folded position and guide it rim-first into the vagina. You can put in the cup while sitting, standing or squatting; spreading your legs will make it easier.



To avoid leaks, make sure that the cup has opened properly by rotating the cup after you put it into the vagina.

To remove the cup, first wash your hands in clean water and relax your muscles. Break the seal by squeezing the bottom part of the cup until you feel or hear the suction release. Now gently shake the cup from side to side while pulling down. Always pull the cup out while pinching the bottom of the cup. Then tip the contents into the toilet. When your period is over, wash the cup carefully and store it in the bag it comes with or make your own container. Never store it in an airtight plastic container or bag. The cup should be cleaned before and after your cycle, and after emptying.

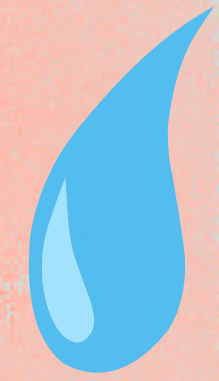
Free Bleeding

If you don't want to use any menstrual products, free bleeding is another option! You may ask: what exactly is free bleeding? It is in the name - it's when you bleed freely, and don't use pads, tampons, or other menstrual products. It may seem a little scary at first, but this is totally okay! Some people who free bleed wear their usual underwear, or get rid of it, and instead place a towel underneath to absorb the blood. It can help to place a towel anywhere you sit, and also place one on your bed at night.

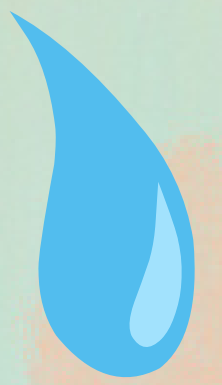
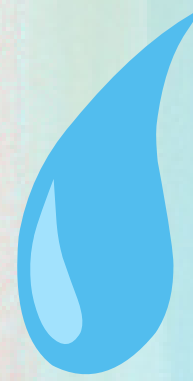
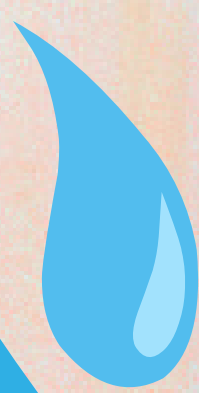


HOW TO

CHOOSE



Feeling a little overwhelmed? That's okay! With so many menstrual products available, how do you choose? A pad is a good place to start. It's simple to use and you can take your time getting comfortable with the way your body works (and what it feels like) before they start using something that they have to put in their vagina. But if you are very active or love to swim, it might be a good idea to try tampons or a cup. Many people use a combination of products – tampons or a cup and pads, pads at night time, different sizes of pads or tampons.

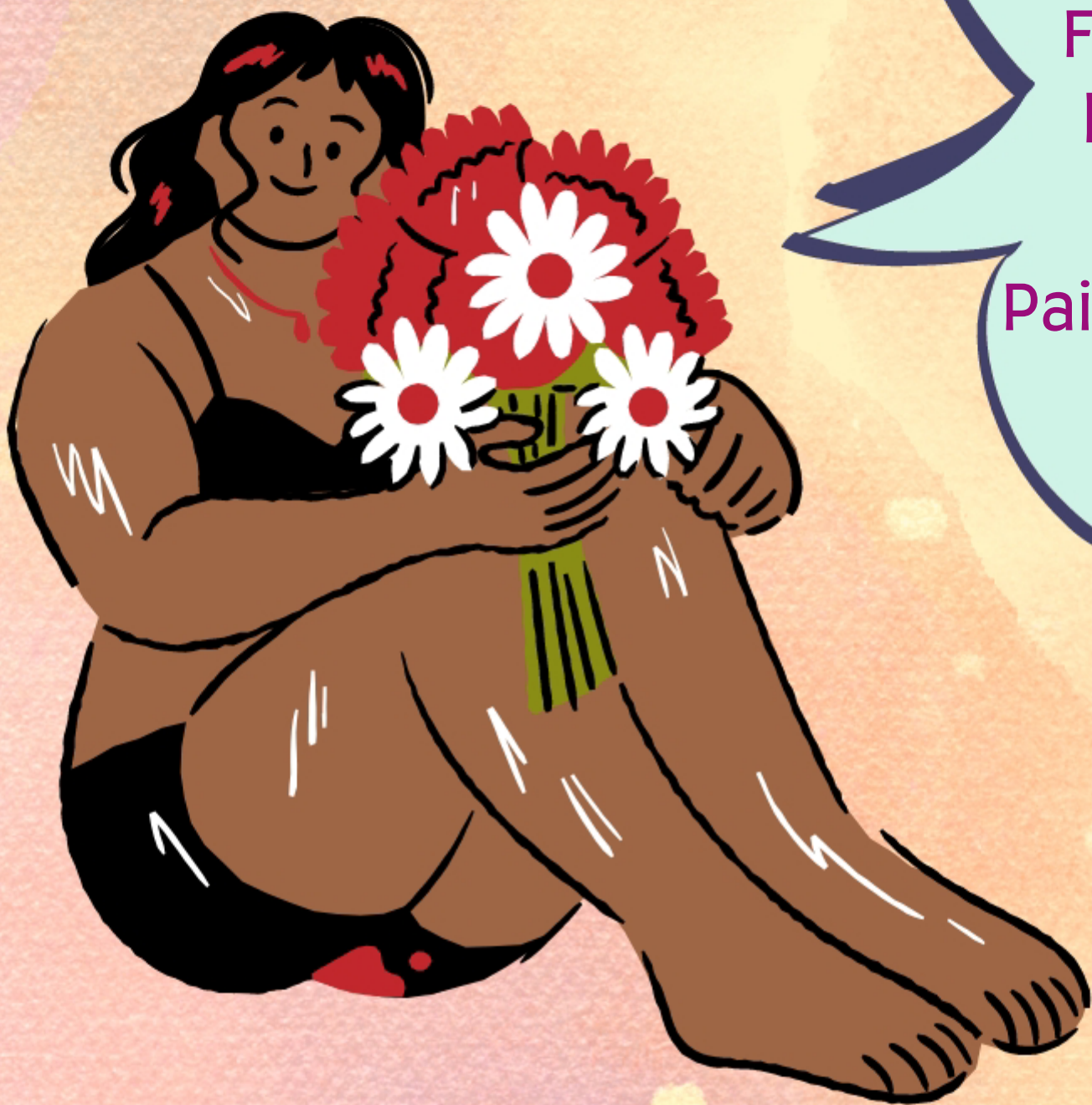


Don't be afraid to experiment and find out what works for you! To help decide, consider: what your flow is like during the day and at night, how the amount of bleeding changes from the beginning to the end of your period, how familiar you are with your vagina, which products you think you would be most comfortable using, how much you are away from home, how active you are, how comfortable you are washing and reusing products that have menstrual blood in them, and what is easier for your lifestyle. Try to keep a supply at home, and in a purse or backpack.

For people with disabilities, menstrual products can be very problematic. Many people with disabilities had to go through many attempts to decide which works best.

Many suggest that menstrual cups and/or period underwear work best for them – these could be put on with one hand and simple to slip on, and better with the help of someone they trust. But you can still experiment and find out what works best for you.

Menstrual Cramps



Menstrual cramps can happen before and/or during your period. They are the feeling of pain or discomfort in your lower belly.

For some people, cramps can just be uncomfortable. For others, it can be extremely painful.

Painful cramps may be caused by other conditions. So if the cramps are too painful, get in touch with a wellness-care provider.

Cramps that aren't caused by another condition can lessen with age!

Pain relievers like ibuprofen, naproxen or acetaminophen can help.

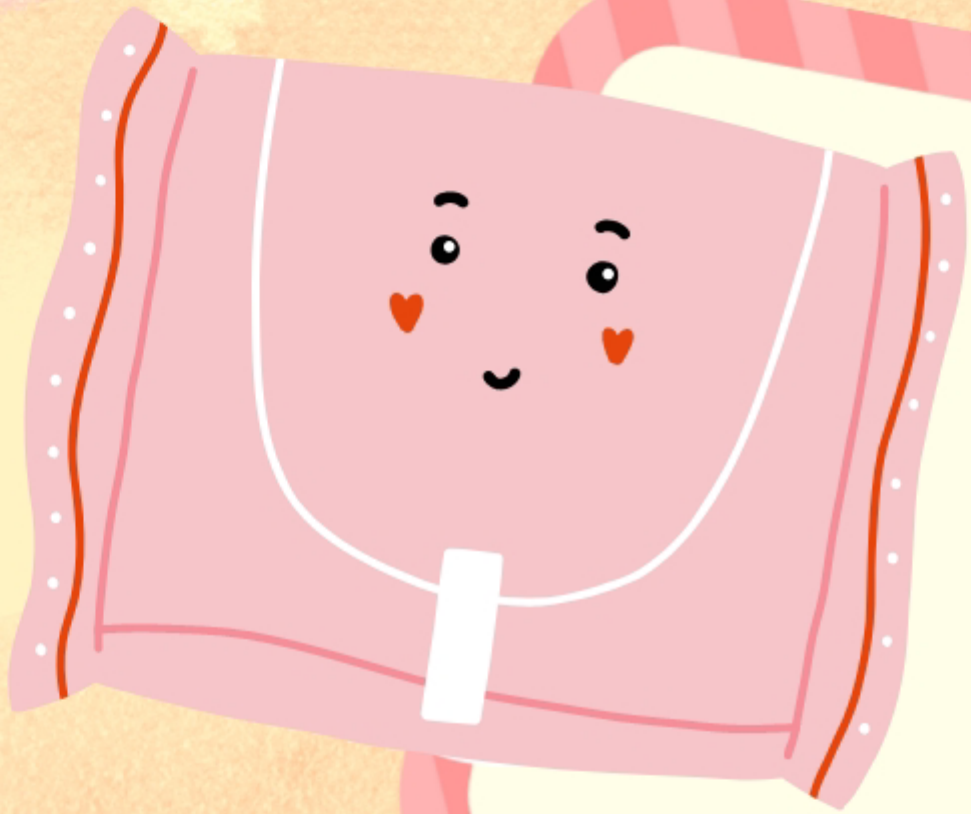


Some Tips

- Talking to relatives or friends and finding out what they do for cramps.
- Exercise and/or yoga.
- Eat a nourishing diet and avoid caffeine.
- Give yourself (or have someone give you) a gentle massage.



To Help

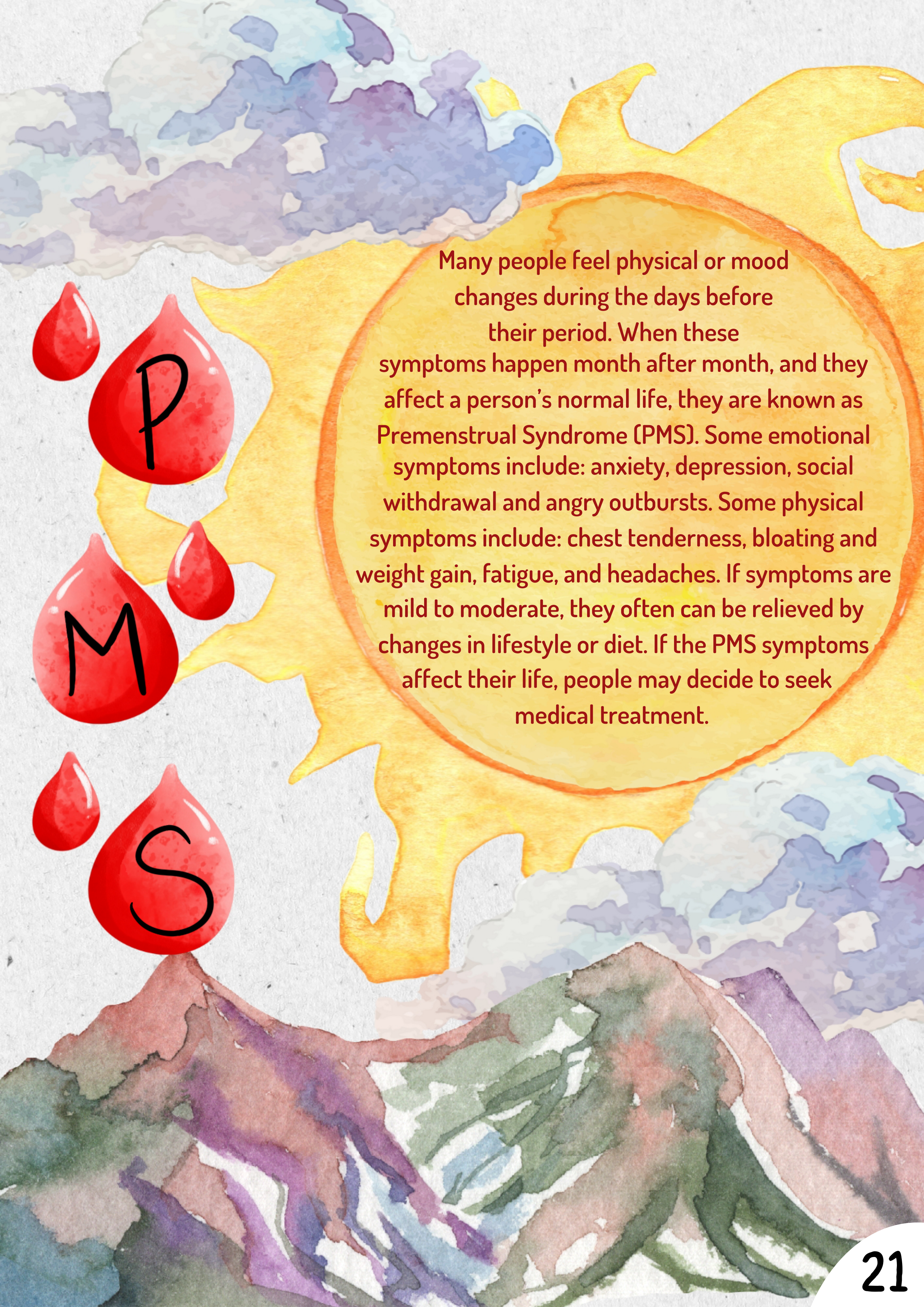


- Apply heat to your belly with a heating pad or a hot water bottle; or take a hot bath.
- Hormonal birth control can also make periods more regular, less heavy and less painful.

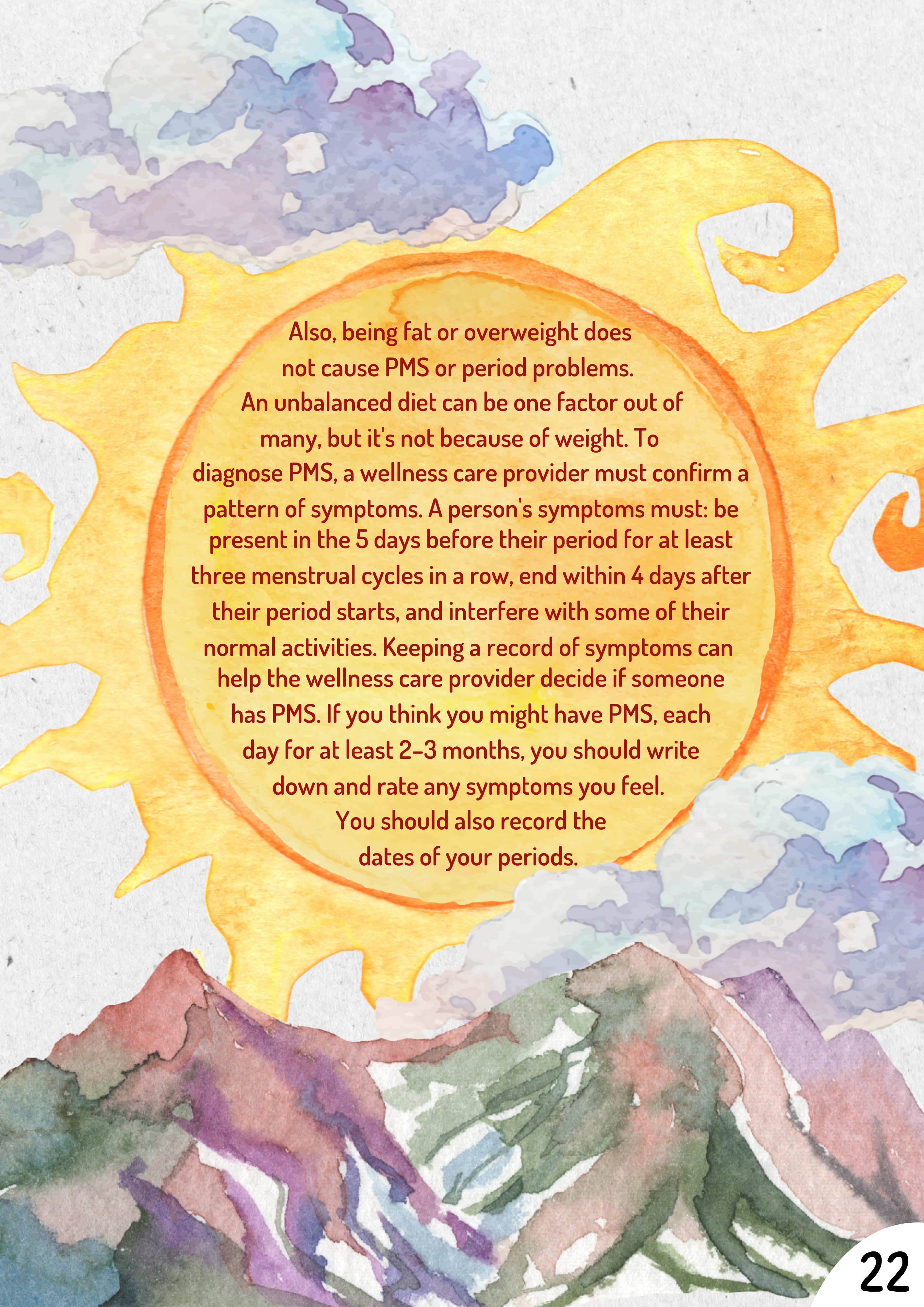
Your Cramps

- Orgasms can reduce cramps, but beware: vaginal penetration can be painful if you have vaginal pain during your period.
- Vitamins E and K help with regularity, and to slow a very heavy flow.





Many people feel physical or mood changes during the days before their period. When these symptoms happen month after month, and they affect a person's normal life, they are known as Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS). Some emotional symptoms include: anxiety, depression, social withdrawal and angry outbursts. Some physical symptoms include: chest tenderness, bloating and weight gain, fatigue, and headaches. If symptoms are mild to moderate, they often can be relieved by changes in lifestyle or diet. If the PMS symptoms affect their life, people may decide to seek medical treatment.



Also, being fat or overweight does not cause PMS or period problems. An unbalanced diet can be one factor out of many, but it's not because of weight. To diagnose PMS, a wellness care provider must confirm a pattern of symptoms. A person's symptoms must: be present in the 5 days before their period for at least three menstrual cycles in a row, end within 4 days after their period starts, and interfere with some of their normal activities. Keeping a record of symptoms can help the wellness care provider decide if someone has PMS. If you think you might have PMS, each day for at least 2–3 months, you should write down and rate any symptoms you feel. You should also record the dates of your periods.

Keeping

Track



How?

You can keep track of your menstrual cycle each month by keeping a journal or calendar. On the first day of your period, make a dot on the calendar, and continue the dots until you are no longer bleeding, like below.

SUN	MON	TUES	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT
				PERIOD STARTS		
			PERIOD ENDS			

What else?

You can also add notes, like how much rest you did or didn't get, what you were eating, or how bad your cramps were.

Menstrual tracking apps for phones, tablets, or websites are another way to do this.

Why?

It's helpful to keep track of menstrual cycles each month, especially if you're sexually active. It can help you figure out what things seem to make you feel best and what only makes you feel worse.

