Coping With Irregular Periods and Menopause

by BRENDA VANTA

What Do My Irregular Periods Mean?

Before you enter menopause, you may notice changes in your periods. They can become quite unpredictable at times.

The main concern is the uncertainty, which can be annoying and embarrassing — you never know when to expect your period, whether it will be light or heavy, or how long will last.

Fortunately, the better you understand what happens in your body, the easier it is to be prepared.

Why Do You Experience Irregular Periods

These changes occur because of your declining levels of estrogen and progesterone, the two hormones that control the menstrual cycle. As such, an irregular period can be one of the first indications that you have entered perimenopause.

This phase can start in your 40s, or even earlier in life. Again, there will be some uncertainty, as perimenopause may take a few months or it may take 10 years, but the average time from first signs to reaching menopause is about four years.

At menopause, the levels of female hormones drop abruptly, as the ovaries stop releasing eggs.

Why Is My Period Lasting So Long?

Having a long, slow period is not uncommon in perimenopause. Because of fluctuating hormones, you may have some months where your period is perfectly normal, but others where you have a period lasting 8 days.

According to Dr. Wulf H. Utian, a women's health expert: "You may go months with a normal period, or months with one that's so heavy you can't leave the house ... You may find your period comes every 28 days or every 45 days. There just doesn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to it."

A lengthy period is nothing to be concerned about; periods lasting 3 weeks have been reported by perimenopausal women, and it's perfectly normal. Spotting, missed periods, light periods, and heavier periods are all common changes that occur to women's cycles as they enter menopause.

Though having long lasting periods is common, it could also be a sign of other health concerns, so be sure to check in with your doctor if you're concerned about your extra long menstrual cycle.

Other causes of irregular periods include:

- Polyps
- Endometriosis
- Thyroid problems
- Pelvic infections
- Cancer
- Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)

It's a good idea to mention your lengthy period to your doctor in case one of these issues are to blame.

You may find that lifestyle changes, such as quitting smoking and cutting back on caffeine and alcohol, may help your irregular periods. If lifestyle changes don't help, medications and surgery may be discussed. Once you enter menopause, your period will stop altogether and these menacing symptoms will cease.

Irregular Periods Are Not the Only Sign

Pay attention to your body, as you may notice other changes that could indicate perimeopause. Your breasts may feel more tender at times and PMS (premenstrual syndrome) may feel worse. Hot flashes can occur as well.

Sex drive usually decreases and you may experience vaginal dryness because of the decline in your sex hormones. You may feel tired for no reason, urinate more frequently or have urine leakage when there is more pressure on the bladder (i.e. when you cough or sneeze). Mood swings and sleeping problems are also common.

Tips for Managing Irregular Periods and Other Perimenopause Symptoms

- **Always be prepared.** Make sure you have a few tampons or pads in your purse. If you know you won’t have access to a bathroom for more than a few hours, consider wearing an absorbent pad when you leave home.
- **Stay active.** Try to exercise daily. Going for a walk, using the treadmill, or doing some strength training (with weights) are all good options. Exercise can help balance your hormones, improve your mood and sleep and bring your energy levels up.
- **Sleep well.** Try to get eight hours of sleep per night, and go to bed and wake up at the same time. Listen to some music, or read a book before bedtime, rather than watch TV. Don’t smoke, and avoid coffee or alcoholic drinks before bedtime.
- **Eat well.** Maintain a healthy weight with exercise and proper diet. Add a multi vitamin/mineral supplement.
- **Relax**. Try some relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, yoga or meditation.

Considerations

Irregular periods and other symptoms of perimenopause are normal, however you should see your doctor if your periods are extremely heavy (with or without blood clots), if they last longer than usual, or if you have spots between periods or after sex. In these cases, your doctor may investigate to see if there is another underlying condition like fibroids, blood clotting problems or cancer.

You can also become pregnant during perimenopause and have abnormal bleeding, therefore pregnancy should be ruled out as well.