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# WOMEN'S Your guide to HEALTH

A useful and informative guide to women's health, helping you to become empowered and confident in knowing your own body.



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# WHY IS WOMENS HEALTH IMPORTANT?

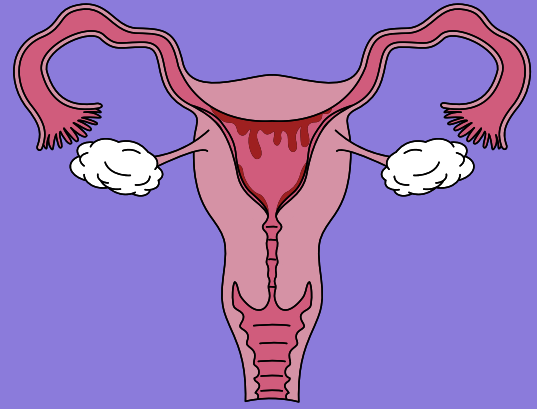


Everyone deserves high quality and compassionate care, however, studies completed by the Department of Health have shown that only 51% of the population feel that they receive the care they deserve. Women across the United Kingdom have called for change, in both how their health care is provided and how they want to feel understood and trusted by health care professionals. This booklet is aimed at young people that have female anatomy and would like to learn more about women's health issues they may face after leaving school.



Statistics taken from the Women's Health Strategy: Agenda for Change (2022)

# MENSTRUAL HEALTH



## How long should a period last?

An average period can last between 2–7 days. It's important to remember that every body is different and that not everyone's period will be the same length or heaviness. An average menstrual cycle is around 28 days long, but again, this can be different from person to person. It's also normal for your periods to be irregular in the first 2–3 years after starting them for the first time. You can track your periods using things like apps or your calendar to know when they're coming!

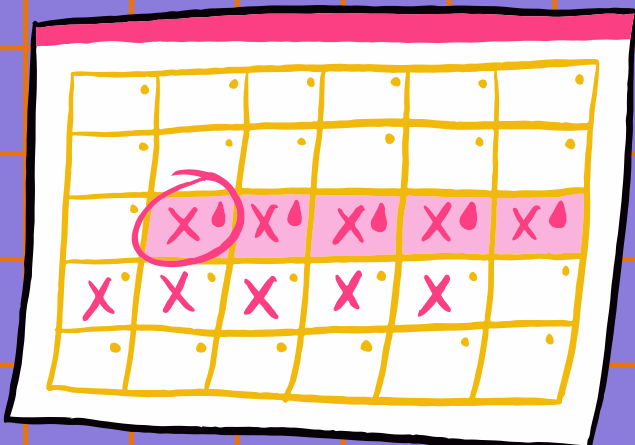
## What is a period?

Menstruation, (often referred to as a "period") is the monthly process of the uterus dispelling the uterine lining, which comes out of the cervix as menstrual blood and tissue. The day you start your period is counted as the first day of your cycle.

## What is ovulation?

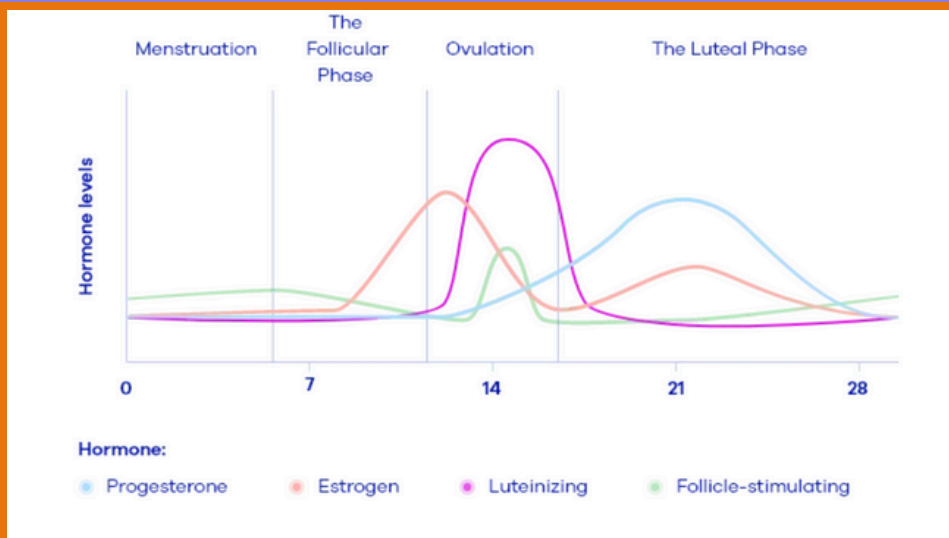
Ovulation is when an ovary releases an egg, which travels through the fallopian tubes to be fertilised by sperm in order to make a baby.

Ovulation can occur between 10–16 days after the start of your period, or in an average 28 day cycle, around day 14.





# HORMONAL CHANGES



## HORMONES

The menstrual cycle is made up of complex interactions with the four hormones Oestrogen, Progesterone, Lutenising Hormone (LH) and Follicle-Stimulating Hormone. The levels of these hormones rise and fall throughout every menstrual cycle and can be associated with things such as mood changes, food cravings and even things like sleep and energy levels.

## WHY ARE THESE IMPORTANT?

By recognising the various hormonal changes going on throughout the menstrual cycle, we can understand how they affect our mood and lifestyle habits. This can then allow us to optimise our activities, hobbies and lifestyle by linking them to our various uterine phases (Menstruation, Follicular, Ovulation and Luteal).

# HORMONAL PHASES



## Menstruation

During this point of the cycle, oestrogen and progesterone are at their lowest, which causes the top layers of the uterus lining to shed. These hormonal changes can also cause changes to your diet, making you hungrier whilst on your period, often causing cravings. Serotonin, a mood boosting hormone, also declines around your period, causing further mood changes. This loss in serotonin can also make you crave sweet foods or foods heavy in carbohydrates to give you a mood boost.

## OVULATION

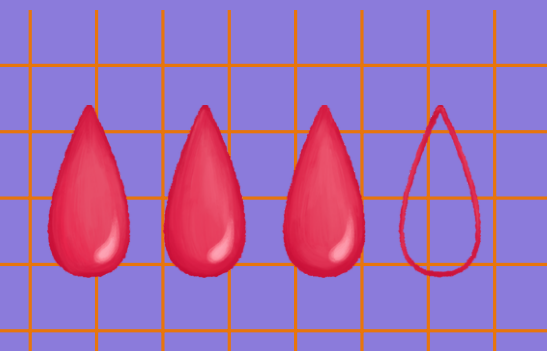
Ovulation is the release of an egg from your ovary into the fallopian tube. You may also have an odd cycle where you don't ovulate at all! Due to a surge in oestrogen and testosterone, you might be feeling more confident, social and can retain more information than normal. This is a great time to go out with friends, meet new people and generally be more social.

## Follicular

This phase begins halfway through your period and ends at ovulation. Within this phase, one follicle within the ovaries will begin to mature in order to prepare for being released into the fallopian tubes. You'll experience a surge in oestrogen and testosterone around this time, making you feel energetic and motivated. This is a great time to try out a new sport or a new hobby you've been meaning to try as your energy levels are surging!

## LUTEAL

This phase begins after ovulation and lasts until the start of your next period. A hormone called progesterone surges within this stage, causing a slowing effect, both on digestion and your mood. You may find yourself bloated or experiencing cravings, as progesterone can lower blood sugars, so make sure to have some high protein, high carb snacks! In the week before your period, oestrogen and progesterone levels fall, which may leave you feeling sad, anxious and fatigued. This is a common experience known as PMS (pre-menstrual syndrome). During this time, it's important to be kind to yourself, practice some self care and try some gentle exercise to boost your mood.



# PERIODS GETTING IN THE WAY OF YOUR LIFE?

## Painful Periods

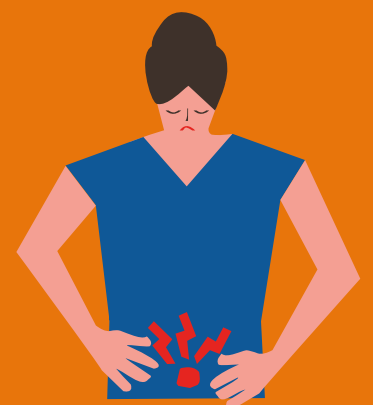
Pain during periods is very common, with up to 80% of women experiencing pain caused by their cycle. Menstrual pain is caused by your uterus contracting to expel blood, so it is common to feel this pain in your lower abdomen. However, pain can often spread to areas such as the lower back, down your legs and the perineum (the area between the vulva and the anus). Exercise can help relieve pain as well as taking paracetamol or ibuprofen. Heat therapy such as taking a bath or cuddling a hot water bottle may help as well.

## Irregular and Missed Periods

People experiencing a wide variation of time between periods, the amount of blood lost and the length of their period can be considered as having an irregular period. Irregular periods are very common within the first two years after starting your period. It can also be very common for a person to skip or miss a period altogether. Common reasons for this include stress, diet, sudden weight loss or overexercising. However this also happens during pregnancy or before a person begins menopause (when periods stop). If you're worried about your irregular cycle or a missed period, visit your GP to explore why this may be happening.

## Heavy Periods

The heaviness of period flow varies from person to person, but if your heavy periods are impacting your life, book an appointment to see your GP to discuss treatment options. Treatment options for heavy periods include various methods of hormonal contraception, ranging from an intra-uterine devices (IUD) to progesterone tablets. But if you don't want to use hormonal contraception, there are other methods available!



# How do periods change as we get older?

## In your 20's

Once you enter your 20's, your periods should become more consistent and predictable when compared with your teenage years, as you will be ovulating regularly. This is also the time many individuals start taking contraception which may affect their menstrual cycle and how often they bleed. Various forms of contraception can be explored in order to fit your lifestyle and beliefs (more on these options later).

## In your 40's

Beginning in your 40's, the amount of oestrogen produced by the ovaries starts to fluctuate and ovulation won't be as regular. This is something called perimenopause that begins before periods completely stop. Within perimenopause, the length and heaviness of your periods may change and you may start experiencing symptoms such as hot flashes, mood changes, vaginal dryness and urinary issues.

## In your 30's

Just like in your 20's, your periods should be consistent and predictable. However, some benign conditions may appear around this age, such as endometriosis and fibroids/polyps of the uterus or ovaries. These conditions can often change the heaviness and length of your periods, so it's important to see your GP if you experience any worrying symptoms (these will also be explored later). The menstrual cycle can also change after having a baby, with periods starting again around 6 weeks after delivery or until breastfeeding has ended.

## In your 50's

The average age for menopause to begin is 51 years old, often ranging between 45-55. Menopause is a time when ovulation and periods stop, meaning that pregnancy is no longer possible. It's important to know that some ethnicities, such as African or Hispanic people, tend to start menopause sooner than average. A good indicator would be finding out when your mum started her menopause.



# Cervical Screening

## What is cervical screening?

All women aged 25–64 are invited to attend a cervical screening (often referred to as a smear test). During the examination, a small sample of cells will be taken from your cervix using a speculum. The test looks for HPV (Human-Papillomavirus) that cause changes to the cells in your cervix. HPV is one of the highest causes of cervical cancer, making this screening extremely vital in preventing the possible development of cancer cells in the cervix.

## What happens if HPV is found?

There are two kinds of positive HPV results. The first is HPV has been found but with no abnormal cell changes, in which case you will be invited for another screening in a year, or HPV is found but with abnormal cell changes, in which case a colposcopy (a test to take a closer look at your cervix) will be arranged.



## Why is it important?

These screenings check the health of your cervix and help identify any abnormal changes before they turn into cancer. You may remember getting your HPV vaccination in high school that lowers your risk of cervical cancer. Although the vaccine is very important, it doesn't protect against all types of cervical cancer, making it very important to get your cervix health checked.

**It's important to remember that cervical screenings are not a test for cancer, but they aim to prevent it. Cervical screening is your choice but it can help to inform you of your body's health and prevent the risk of spreading HPV and developing cancer cells.**

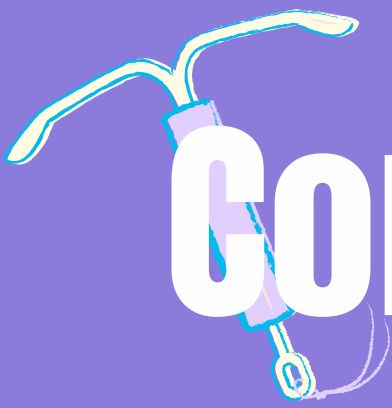


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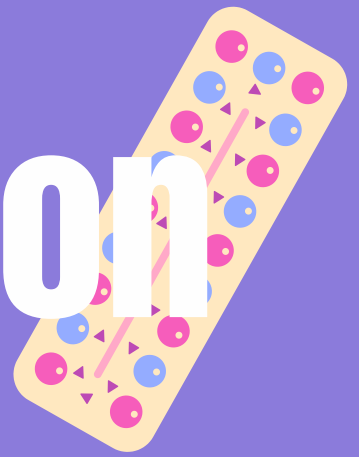
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# Sexual Health and Contraception



# Contraception



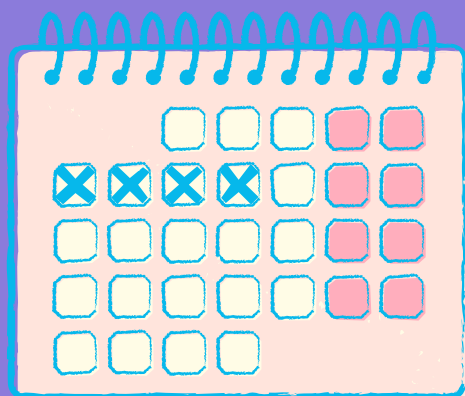
## What is contraception?

Contraception is a barrier method that prevents sperm from fertilising an egg. This will then prevent pregnancy. This barrier method can come in many different forms and many will have an effect on the duration, heaviness and schedule of your period. Some contraceptives can also protect against sexually transmitted infections (STI's).

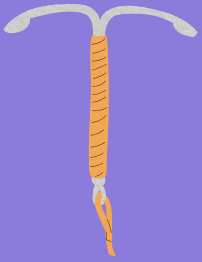
**Most contraceptive options are aimed towards women as it allows them to take control of their own cycle and empowers them through choice.**

## What are the effects of contraception?

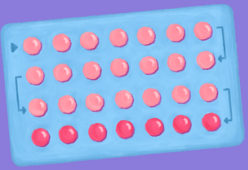
It's important to note that different contraceptive methods can cause various side effects. These can include heavier or lighter periods, weight gain, mood changes and many more factors. It's important to consider what best fits with your lifestyle and beliefs before making any decisions.



# Contraceptive Methods



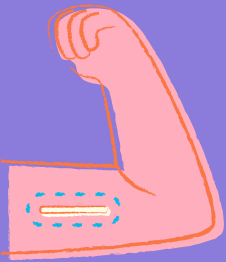
IUD/IUS - An intra-uterine device/system is a small plastic t-shape device that a doctor or nurse fits into your uterus. IUD's are commonly made out of copper and do not use hormones. IUD's are also a form of emergency contraception. IUS's release progestogen in the uterus to prevent pregnancy. Both methods are over 99% effective and can last up to 10 years.



Combined pill - The combined pill is a method of hormonal contraception that releases oestrogen and progestogen, preventing the release of an egg from the ovaries. This pill is usually taken every day (or everyday for 21 days), with a break of 7 days to allow for a bleed. Each pill is different so it's important to read the instructions! If used correctly, the pill is 99% effective.



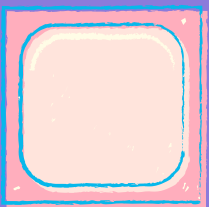
Progestogen-only pill - Also called the mini-pill, the progestogen-only pill is a type of hormonal contraception that prevents an egg being released from the ovaries. This pill needs to be taken at the same time every day in order for it to be effective and there are no breaks for bleeding. The progestogen-only pill is over 99% effective when taken correctly.



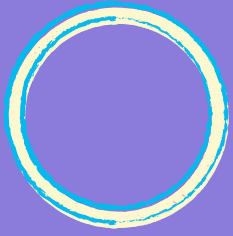
Contraceptive implant - The contraceptive implant is a small plastic rod (around 4cm long) that a doctor or nurse puts in your arm. The implant releases progestogen, preventing the ovaries from releasing an egg each month. The implant lasts for 3 years and is 99% effective.



Contraceptive injection - The contraceptive injection contains progestogen that prevents the ovaries from releasing an egg each month. The injection lasts for 8-13 weeks, depending on the type and is 99% effective if used correctly. The injection is generally given by a doctor or nurse, but there is a contraceptive injection that you can do at home if you prefer.



Contraceptive patch - The contraceptive patch is a small square patch (usually 5cm by 5cm) that slowly releases progestogen and oestrogen into the the body to prevent the release on an egg each month. The patch can be worn for 7 days and then replaced with a new one. With correct usage, the patch is 99% effective.



Vaginal ring - The vaginal ring is a contraceptive ring (usually around 5cm across) that you place inside your vagina. The ring releases progestogen and oestrogen, stopping the release of an egg each month. The ring can be left in the vagina for up to 3 weeks and then replaced. When used correctly, the ring is 99% effective.



Male condoms - Male condoms are a non-hormonal contraceptive worn on the penis to prevent sperm from reaching the egg. Male condoms are 98% effective if used correctly and are one of the only contraceptives that also protect you against STI's (Sexually Transmitted Infections).




Female condoms - Female condoms, often called internal condoms, are a non-hormonal form of contraception that are 95% effective when used correctly. The condom is placed inside the vagina, with the outer ring outside of the vagina. The female condom is also one of the only contraceptives that protect you from STI's.



Natural cycles planning - Natural cycles planning is another non-hormonal way that avoids pregnancy. This is done by tracking your menstrual cycle, seeing which days you are most fertile, and avoiding sex or using condoms on these days. Many factors can affect your fertility, and keeping track of things such as your daily temperature, the colour and thickness of your discharge are important in finding out when you're at your most fertile. When done correctly, natural cycles planning can be between 91% and 99% effective. However, when done incorrectly, it is 76% effective at preventing pregnancy.

**It's important to remember that each type of contraceptive has various side effects that may affect your body. It's also vital to choose a contraceptive method that is right for your lifestyle, body and beliefs. More information on contraception can be found on the NHS website, or you can book an appointment with your GP to find out more.**


# Sexually Transmitted Infections



Sexually transmitted infections (STI's) are common infections that can be passed on through sex or sexual contact. They can be usually treated at a sexual health clinic.

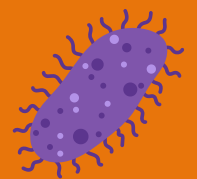
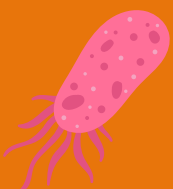
Common symptoms of STI's:

- Unusual discharge from the vagina or penis
- Pain when peeing
- Lumps or growths around the genitals or anus
- A rash
- Unusual vaginal bleeding
- Itchy genitals or anus
- Blisters, sores or warts around the genitals or anus
- Warts in the mouth or throat, but this is very rare

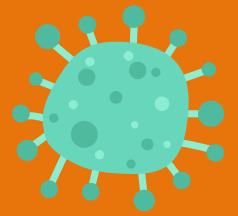


Many STI's have no symptoms. This can mean that you're not aware of it, but can pass it on to a partner.

Most STI's will need to be treated, and the treatment offered will depend on the STI contracted. Many STI's are treated with antibiotics. It is important to take the full course of the antibiotics, otherwise the treatment may not work.



# Common STI's:



## Chlamydia

Chlamydia is a bacterial infection that usually has no symptoms. It can be very treatable if caught early on and is usually treated with antibiotics.



## Gonorrhoea

Gonorrhoea is a bacterial infection that can cause green/yellow discharge from the vagina or penis, pain when peeing and bleeding between periods for women. Gonorrhoea is usually treated with a single antibiotic injection.

## Genital Warts

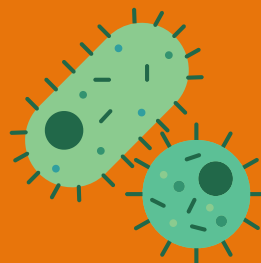
Genital warts are small, rough lumps that can appear around the vagina, penis or anus. Treatment for genital warts is not always needed. They sometimes disappear on their own within 6 months.

## Pubic Lice

Pubic lice are very small (2mm) and grey brown in colour. They can live in hair on the pubis, chest, face and eyelashes. Pubic lice is often treated by medicated shampoo or cream.

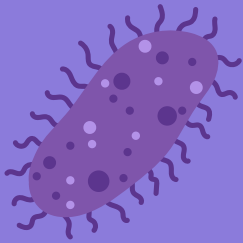
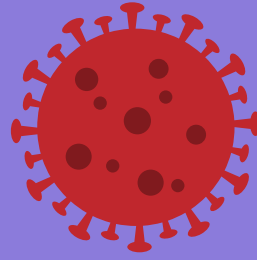
## Syphilis

Syphilis is an STI with mild, hard-to-notice symptoms, but if it goes untreated, it can often be life threatening. Symptoms include small sores on the genitals, rashes on the hands and feet, flu-like symptoms or white spots in the mouth. Syphilis is usually treated with a course of antibiotics.



## HPV

Human papillomavirus is a group of very common viruses. HPV does not usually have any symptoms, but affected people may develop genital warts. Most of the time, HPV doesn't cause any issues, but some types can cause abnormal changes to cells that lead to cancer. There is currently no treatment as HPV clears itself within 2 years.



## Genital Herpes

Genital herpes is an STI that can cause small blisters on the genitals, anus and thighs that may burst, causing open sores. It may also cause burning or itching and pain when peeing. Genital herpes usually goes away on it's own, but if it comes back, it can be treated with prescribed ointments or creams.

## Trichomoniasis

Trichomoniasis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by a parasite called *Trichomonas vaginalis* (TV). Symptoms can include abnormal discharge, swelling or pain in the penis/vagina. Trichomoniasis usually goes away on it's own but can be treated with a course of antibiotics.



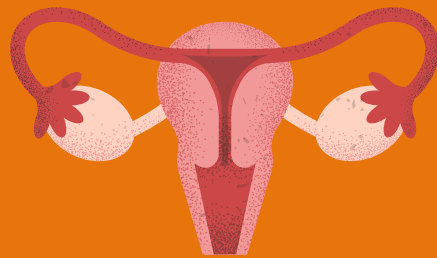


A stylized, purple-colored illustration of a female reproductive system, including the uterus, fallopian tubes, and ovaries, centered on an orange background. The text is overlaid on this graphic.

**Gynaecological**

**&**

**Reproductive  
Conditions**



## **What is a gynaecological disorder?**

A gynecological disorder is a condition that affects the normal function of female reproductive organs, including the breasts and organs in the abdominal and pelvic area, namely the womb (uterus), ovaries, fallopian tubes, vagina and vulva.



**We've included some information on the next couple of pages that explore various common gynaecological and reproductive conditions that many women encounter throughout their lifetime. If you feel that you are experiencing any of the symptoms or issues explored below, please book an appointment with your GP to discuss it.**

# Adenomyosis & Endometriosis

## **Adenomyosis:**

Adenomyosis is a condition where the lining of the womb (uterus) starts growing into the muscle in the wall of the womb. Adenomyosis is more commonly diagnosed in women over the age of 30. It can affect anyone who has periods. Symptoms can include painful and heavy periods, bloating and pelvic pain. However, some people with Adenomyosis don't have any symptoms. Adenomyosis is diagnosed by completing an internal examination and could be followed up with an ultrasound. Treatments for this include getting an IUS (which thins the uterine lining) or other hormonal contraceptives. Tablets such as anti-inflammatory medicines can also help.

## **Endometriosis:**

Endometriosis is a condition where tissue similar to the lining of the womb grows in other places, such as the ovaries and fallopian tubes. Endometriosis can affect women of any age, including teenagers. Symptoms can include intense pain around your abdomen, pelvis and vagina on or off your period, pain when peeing or pooing on your period, nausea, fatigue, constipation or diarrhoea, or blood in your pee or poo during your period. Endometriosis can also cause difficulties in getting pregnant. See a GP if you believe you have any symptoms of endometriosis and keep a diary of all your symptoms. It can be extremely difficult to diagnose endometriosis as the symptoms vary massively, and because of the impact it can cause on women's lives, it can sometimes cause depression. There is currently no cure other than surgery for endometriosis, but symptoms can be controlled with painkillers.

# Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) and Fibroids

## **PCOS:**

Polycystic ovaries contain a large number of harmless follicles that are up to 8mm (approximately 0.3in) in size.

The follicles are underdeveloped sacs in which eggs develop. In PCOS, these sacs are often unable to release an egg, which means ovulation does not take place. Symptoms can include irregular periods, excess hair on the face and body or you may have enlarged ovaries that contain many fluid-filled sacs that surround the eggs. There's no current cure for PCOS, but the symptoms can be treated.

## **Fibroids:**

Fibroids are non-cancerous growths that develop in or around the womb (uterus). The growths are made up of muscle and fibrous tissue, and vary in size. They're sometimes known as uterine myomas or leiomyomas.

Many women are unaware they have fibroids because they do not have any symptoms. 1 in 3 women will experience symptoms such as heavy or painful periods, lower back pain, constant need to urinate and constipation. Fibroids do not need to be treated if they are not causing symptoms. After the menopause, they'll often shrink without treatment. If you do have symptoms caused by fibroids, medicine to help relieve the symptoms will usually be recommended first. There are also medications available to help shrink fibroids. If these prove ineffective, surgery or other, less invasive procedures may be recommended.

# Vaginal Infections

## **Thrush:**

Thrush is a common yeast infection that affects men and women. It's usually harmless but it can be uncomfortable and keep coming back. Symptoms of thrush can include abnormal white discharge (often with a cottage cheese appearance), itching and irritation around the vulva and pain when urinating.

Thrush can be cured using antifungal medication, often in the form of a pessary inserted into the vagina, a cream or a tablet. This usually takes around 7–14 days to clear up.

## **Bacterial Vaginosis (BV):**

This is a bacterial infection that is a common cause of unusual discharge. BV is not an STI, but can increase the risk of contracting an STI, such as Chlamydia.

Symptoms of BV include unusual discharge, often with an unpleasant or fishy smell. The colour of your discharge may also change, such as becoming grey and watery. However, half of women with BV do not experience any symptoms. Bacterial vaginosis is usually treated with antibiotic tablets or gels or creams. These are prescribed by a GP or sexual health clinic.

# Ovarian Cysts

## What are ovarian cysts?

An ovarian cyst is a fluid-filled sac that develops on an ovary. They're very common and do not usually cause any symptoms.

Most ovarian cysts occur naturally and go away in a few months without needing any treatment.

## What are the symptoms?

An ovarian cyst usually only causes symptoms if it splits (ruptures), is very large or twists and then blocks the blood supply to the ovaries.

Symptoms can include:

- Pelvic pain
- Difficulty pooing
- Frequent need to urinate
- Heavy, irregular or lighter periods
- Bloating
- Difficulty getting pregnant

## What are the types of ovarian cysts?

The 2 main types of ovarian cyst are:

- Functional ovarian cysts – cysts that develop as part of the menstrual cycle and are usually harmless and short-lived; these are the most common type
- Pathological ovarian cysts – cysts that form as a result of abnormal cell growth; these are much less common

Ovarian cysts can sometimes also be caused by an underlying condition, such as endometriosis. The vast majority of ovarian cysts are non-cancerous (benign), although a small number are cancerous (malignant).

## What is the treatment?

Depending on the size of the cyst or whether you are experiencing symptoms, will determine if treatment is required. In most cases, cysts will go away on their own. If the cysts are large, surgery may be required to remove them.

# Cervical and Ovarian Cancer

## Cervical Cancer:

Cervical cancer is a cancer that's found anywhere in the cervix. It mostly affects women under the age of 45, but anyone with a cervix can get cervical cancer. Nearly every type of cervical cancer is caused by Human papillomavirus (HPV) which causes changes to the cells in your cervix, making them cancerous. Symptoms of cervical cancer can include unusual vaginal bleeding, changes to discharge or pain in the abdomen or pelvis. The treatment received will depend on if the cancer is spread, the size of the cancer, and its location. You may be referred to a specialist to determine this and discuss treatment options.

## Ovarian Cancer:

Ovarian cancer affects the ovaries. It mostly affects women over the age of 50, but it can affect anyone who has ovaries. Ovarian cancer can also run in families. The symptoms of Ovarian cancer include a bloated or swollen stomach, pain or discomfort in the stomach or pelvis, loss of appetite or feeling full quickly and a frequent need to urinate. The GP or practice nurse may refer you for more tests or to see a specialist in hospital if they think you have a condition that needs to be investigated.



### **What is breast cancer?**

Breast cancer is a type of cancer that can affect anyone, but is most common in women. It is the most common type of cancer for women in the UK.

### **How is breast cancer found?**

Breast screening (mammogram) can pick up breast cancer that is too small to feel or see, which may make treatment more likely to be successful. A biopsy may also be done which takes a sample of cells from the breast to test.

# Breast Cancer

### **What are the symptoms?**

Symptoms of breast cancer can include an abnormal lump or swelling in the breast, changes in skin appearance (such as dimpling or redness), nipple discharge or changes in nipple appearance, or pain in the breast or armpit that doesn't go away.

### **What is the treatment?**

The treatment for breast cancer will depend on the size and location of the cancer, the most common treatment for breast cancer is surgery, but other methods such as chemotherapy or radiotherapy can be very effective.





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# RESOURCES

## NHS WEBSITE

[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

The NHS website has lots of information on various conditions, health problems, and issues facing women's health today. NHS websites also have information on where to go for help and support.



## COPPAFEEL

[coppafeel.org](http://coppafeel.org)

Coppafeel is a women's health charity that focuses on raising awareness of breast cancer. Their website has lots of useful information about women's health and can teach you how to check your breasts for abnormalities.



## TRAFFORD DIRECTORY

<https://www.trafforddirectory.co.uk/kb5/trafford/fsd/advice.page?id=md5d9vpwcal>

If you're looking for support local to Trafford, there are many places you can go to for more information! Feel free to look on the Trafford Directory website or use the link below to find out more.



Developed February 2025



# Thanks for Reading!



The world of women's health is actively growing as more research and more studies are being completed in order to better understand the minds and bodies of women.

We hope this information has been useful and informative on teaching you about the different issues faced as women.



If you ever need to talk to someone or want any support on the issues explored within this booklet, please arrange an appointment with your school nurse or your GP.