

5. Female reproductive system



Objectives

By the end of this session, group members will be able to:

- List the main organs in the female reproductive system.
- Explain the process of menstruation and fertilization.



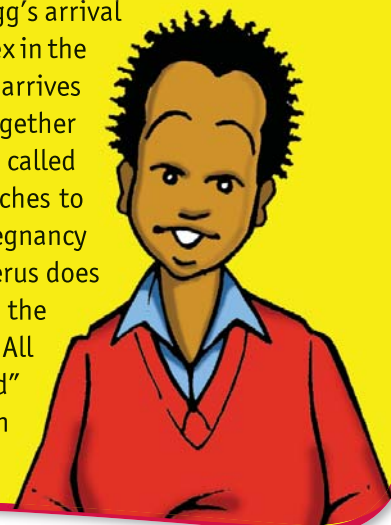
Background notes

The female sex organs that are on the outside of the body are called the vulva. The vulva includes the two folds of skin called the labia, the clitoris, and the vagina.

The labia have two sets of rounded folds of skin called the outer and inner lips. The labia cover and protect the vagina. The inner and outer lips come together in the pubic area. Near the top of the lips, inside the folds, is the clitoris, which is small and round. The clitoris is made up of the same type of skin as the tip of the penis and is very sensitive. The clitoris has no other function than to help a woman have sexual pleasure. The urethra is a short tube that carries urine from the bladder to the outside of the body. The opening to the urethra is very small, and can be hard to find by touch or sight. It is right above the opening to the vagina.

The vagina is below the urethra. Menstrual blood and babies come out of the vagina. The vagina is the place where a man puts his penis during sexual intercourse. The vagina can stretch wide enough to allow a baby to pass through.

Every female is born with thousands of eggs in her ovaries. The eggs are so small that they cannot be seen by the naked eye. Once a girl has reached puberty, a tiny egg matures in one of her ovaries and then travels down a fallopian tube on its way to the uterus. This release of the egg from the ovary is called ovulation. The uterus prepares for the egg's arrival by developing a thick and soft lining like a pillow. If the girl has had sex in the last few days before or the day after she ovulates, by the time the egg arrives in the fallopian tube, there might be some sperm waiting to come together with the egg. When an egg comes together with the sperm this is called fertilization. Then the fertilized egg travels to the uterus, and attaches to the lining of the uterus. This is called implantation and is when a pregnancy begins. If the egg is not fertilized, there is no pregnancy and the uterus does not need the thick lining it has made to protect the egg. It discards the lining, along with some blood, body fluids, and the unfertilized egg. All of this flows out of the vagina. This flow of blood is called the "period" or menstruation and usually leaves the body slowly over three to seven days every month.



Menstruation and ovulation

Menstruation happens for most women about once a month, and that is why it is commonly called the “monthly period.” It usually lasts between three and seven days. It is a sign that a girl or woman can become pregnant any time she has sexual intercourse. Menstruation stops when women are pregnant and breastfeeding.

Just as some girls begin puberty earlier or later than others, the same is true for periods. Some girls may begin to menstruate as early as age 9 or 10, but others may not start their period until a few years later. A woman knows that she has started her period when a little blood comes out of her vagina. The blood does not come out like water from a tap. It comes out slowly, like a dribble. Usually by the time she has noticed a feeling of unusual wetness, her panties have absorbed any blood that has come out. It is important to know when she will start her period each month so she can wear a sanitary pad or other protection to prevent the blood from staining her clothing.

The amount of blood that comes out of the vagina is different for each woman. Usually, an entire period only has a few to several spoonfuls of blood. The blood often starts off as a brown colour and then gets redder. It lightens to a brownish colour again until it stops. The amount of blood can also be different from day to day, some days there will be more blood than others.

The menstrual cycle is the period of time beginning on the first day of a woman’s period until the day before she begins her next period. Since this happens regularly, it is called a cycle. The length of the menstrual cycle (the time between one period and the next) is different for each woman. For some, the cycle is as short as 21 (or even fewer) days. For others, it is as long as 35 days or more. Irregular periods are common in girls who are just beginning to menstruate. It may take the body a while to adjust to all the changes taking place.

For example, a girl may have the same length cycle for two months, then miss a month, or have two periods with fewer days in between them. Her menstrual cycle will probably become more regular, although she may continue to have irregular periods into adulthood. Sometimes she might have some spotting of blood for a day or two in the middle of her cycle. This is usually nothing to worry about. It is important to note that a regular menstrual cycle can become irregular with stress or infections.

Ovulation is the release of an egg from the ovary. The time from ovulation to the next period is 12 to 16 days and is controlled by hormones. The two weeks or so before ovulation and the two weeks after make a menstrual cycle about four weeks or a month in length.

Girls can sometimes notice a whitish liquid on their underpants or feel wetness. Girls often notice this liquid around the time of ovulation, when the body is ready to receive and nurture a fertilized egg. This liquid helps sperm travel through the uterus to meet the egg to become fertilized. Paying attention to vaginal liquid helps girls understand their bodies. Knowing what is normal for the body helps girls know when things are not normal. For example, yellow or strong-smelling liquid is not normal. This can be a sign of infection, and she should visit a health worker.

Menopause

Menopause is when a woman’s menstruation ends. It ends because the hormones that cause eggs to mature in her ovaries stop. When this happens, women can no longer become pregnant. Menopause usually happens when women are around age 45. But, menopause can take place earlier or later than this. Some women may stop menstruating when they are 35 and some not until they are over 50.



Main points

Menstrual blood and babies come out of the vagina. The vagina is the place where a man puts his penis during sexual intercourse. The vagina can stretch wide enough to allow a baby to pass through.

Ovulation is when an egg travels from an ovary down a fallopian tube to the uterus. The uterus develops a thick and soft lining. If the girl has had sex a few days before or the day after she ovulates, there might be some sperm waiting to come together with the egg. When an egg comes together with the sperm this is called fertilization. Then the fertilized egg attaches to the lining of the uterus. This is called implantation and is when a pregnancy begins.

If the egg is not fertilized, there is no pregnancy and the uterus discards the lining, along with some blood, body fluids, and the unfertilized egg. All of this flows out of the vagina slowly over three to seven days. This is called menstruation.



Session guide

Activity: Body mapping

1. Ask for a girl to volunteer to lie down on a large piece of newsprint or pavement. Have another volunteer draw around her body using a pen or chalk so there is an outline of a girl.
2. Ask all group members to talk about and draw the following body parts: eyes, nose, mouth, heart, lungs, and stomach.
3. Ask group members to draw the female reproductive organs (where the egg matures, where egg and sperm unite, where a baby grows, where sex occurs).
4. As people are drawing, do not make any comments or correct any mistakes.
5. Ask for a volunteer to present the drawing and explain the different parts.
6. After the group has talked about the drawing, show them this picture of the female body and reproductive system. Ask them if their drawing looked like this one and if there is anything they would like to change.

