



Periods and the menstrual cycle

Acknowledgements

Jean Hailes acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognises their continued connection to land, waters and culture. We pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

This resource has been developed in partnership between Jean Hailes for Women's Health and Alukura Women's Health Service on behalf of Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (Congress), on the land of the Central Arrernte people.

We acknowledge the support and involvement of NT Health – Primary and Public Health, Central Australia.

We would also like to acknowledge the women of Mparntwe (Alice Springs) and surrounding communities who participated in consultations to help shape these resources.

Jean Hailes for Women's Health gratefully acknowledges the support of the Australian Government.

Feedback

We welcome all feedback and suggestions on how to improve this toolkit.

Send your feedback to education@jeanhailes.org.au



About us

About Jean Hailes

Jean Hailes for Women's Health is a national not-for-profit organisation committed to improving women's health across Australia through every life stage. We use the latest research to develop our website and resources on a range of topics, including polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), periods, sex and sexual health, menopause, endometriosis, and vulva, vagina, ovaries and uterus.

Jean Hailes takes a broad and inclusive approach to the topic of women's health. The terms 'women' and 'girls' are used throughout this resource to refer to all women, girls and gender-diverse people.



About Alukura

Alukura Women's Health Service is an Aboriginal women-only place in Alice Springs caring for the health of Aboriginal women and infants. The name 'Alukura' is a Central Arrernte word meaning women's camp or women's place. The service is provided in a comfortable and culturally safe place for clients.

Alukura provides specialised women's health and midwifery case-managed maternity care. It is guided by traditional Aboriginal grandmother's law to preserve and recognise Aboriginal women's law, culture and languages, as they relate to pregnancy, childbirth and the care of Aboriginal women and babies. With a multi-disciplinary team approach, Alukura ensures Aboriginal women and babies have access to best practice comprehensive primary health care.

Alukura is part of Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, which is the largest Aboriginal community-controlled health organisation in the Northern Territory.



How to use this toolkit

This toolkit has been designed to help health professionals and other health workers deliver education about periods and the menstrual cycle and polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) to Aboriginal women. It includes two presentations:

- Periods and the menstrual cycle
- Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS).

These are available as hard-copy flipcharts or can be downloaded electronically from www.jeanhailes.org.au/resources/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-resources

Using this toolkit

Before using the presentations, we recommend you read through them in full and ensure you understand them.

The presentations have been developed to use with Aboriginal women and girls in Central Australia and might not be appropriate for use with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in other parts of Australia. We recommend always consulting with knowledgeable people in the local community, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers, Liaison Officers or Community Engagement Workers, before using this toolkit to ensure it is relevant and culturally appropriate.

Remember that much of the information in the presentations is considered Women's Business and is regarded as sensitive and private to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. It should not be shared with or made available to men.

The presentations can be used in group sessions and one-on-one consultations. You may choose to deliver the full presentation, or just a few slides, depending on the type of session and the needs of the audience. The time required to deliver a presentation depends on the topic and the needs of the audience. Allow around 30 minutes to deliver *Periods and the menstrual cycle* and around 45 minutes to deliver *Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)*. When delivering the presentations in a group setting, a private space should be provided for the participants to attend. If you are using an iPad or tablet to deliver the presentation, we recommend printing the facilitator notes to refer to.

Further information

You can view and download additional resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls from www.jeanhailes.org.au/resources/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-resources

For example:

- brochures on periods and polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)
- animations on periods, what's PCOS, and how to stay healthy with PCOS.

Useful websites

Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet
www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au

Jean Hailes for Women's Health
www.jeanhailes.org.au

Central Australian Aboriginal Congress
www.caac.org.au

About the artwork



The cover artwork is **Arntarntarerreme** (Looking after each other) by Amunda Gorey. “This one is women with PCOS finding support in services and other women. The shelters on the sides represent the safety and privacy in these supports.”

Amunda Gorey is an Arrernte artist who grew up in the remote community of Santa Teresa, an hour south-east of Alice Springs.



Illustrations by Coolamon Creative.

Coolamon Creative is a 100% Aboriginal owned and operated creative services agency operating out of Darwin and Alice Springs.

What is a menstrual cycle?

Your menstrual cycle means changes in your body to get ready for a pregnancy.

Multiple body parts are involved in your menstrual cycle. These are ovaries, fallopian tubes and the baby bag (womb).

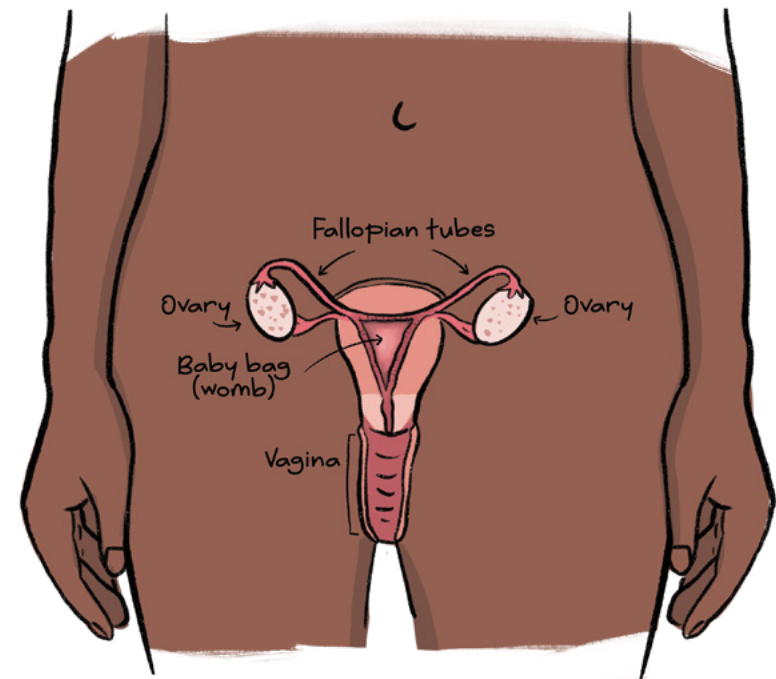
- **Ovaries** are small, round organs in your reproductive system that contain eggs. Women have two ovaries, one on each side.
- **Fallopian tubes** are the tubes that connect the ovaries to the baby bag (womb).
- **Baby bag** (also called womb or uterus) is where the baby grows if you are pregnant.

What is a menstrual cycle?

Your menstrual cycle means changes in your body to get ready for a pregnancy.

Multiple body parts are involved in the menstrual cycle:

- ovaries
- fallopian tubes
- baby bag (womb or uterus).



Hormones

The menstrual cycle is controlled by hormones.

What are hormones?

Hormones are chemicals made in different parts of the body, including the brain and the ovaries.

They send messages through the bloodstream to tissues and organs.

They help control many of the body's functions, such as temperature, growth, energy, repair of cells, reproduction, sexual function and digestion.

Hormones tell the body to eat, stop eating, sleep, wake up, grow or stop growing.

Hormones

The menstrual cycle is controlled by hormones.

Hormones:

- are chemicals made in different parts of the body
- control many of the body's functions.



The menstrual cycle

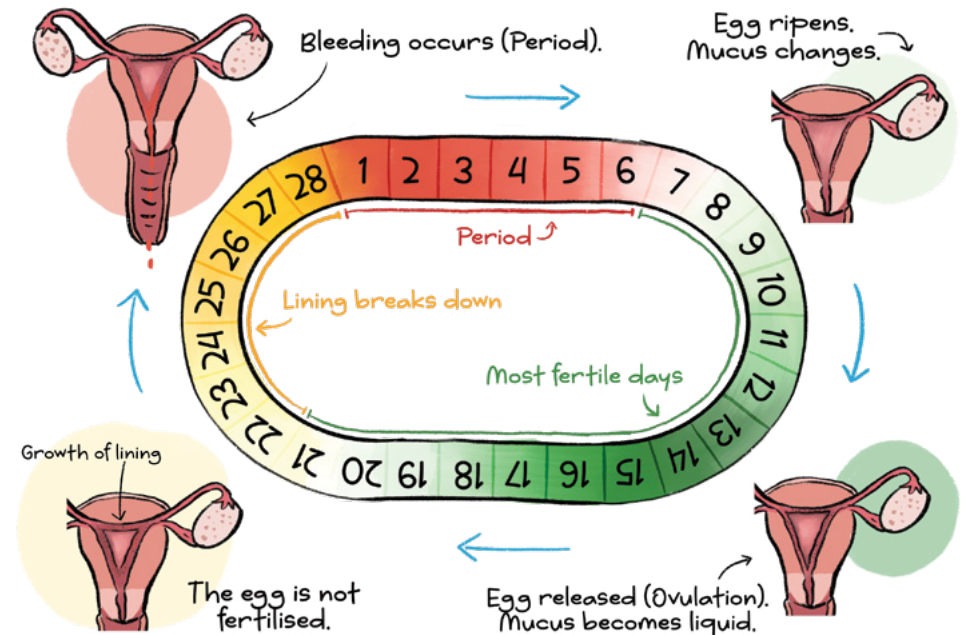
The image shows a 28-day menstrual cycle. An average cycle is about 28 days, but they can be shorter or longer.

- Day 1 is the first day of the menstrual cycle and the first day of your period if you are not pregnant. During this time, the lining of the baby bag breaks down and leaves the body through your vagina. This is your period or 'monthly'.
- After your period, hormone levels rise, and the lining of the baby bag starts getting thicker to prepare for a possible pregnancy.
- Around halfway through your cycle, an egg leaves an ovary and travels down the fallopian tube towards the baby bag. This is when you are most likely to get pregnant.
- If you don't get pregnant, hormone levels drop, the lining of the baby bag breaks down and the menstrual cycle begins again.

Diagram of the menstrual cycle adapted from Remote Primary Health Care Manuals. (2017).
Women's Business Manual (6th edition). Alice Springs, NT: Centre for Remote Health.

The menstrual cycle

During the menstrual cycle, changes happen in your body to get ready for a pregnancy.



What is a period?

A period:

- is when you bleed from your vagina every month
- means you are not pregnant.

Most girls in Australia have their first period at age 12 or 13, but it can start as early as 9 and as late as 16.

Periods are sometimes called 'monthlies', 'menstruation', 'menses', 'bleeds', 'that thing'.

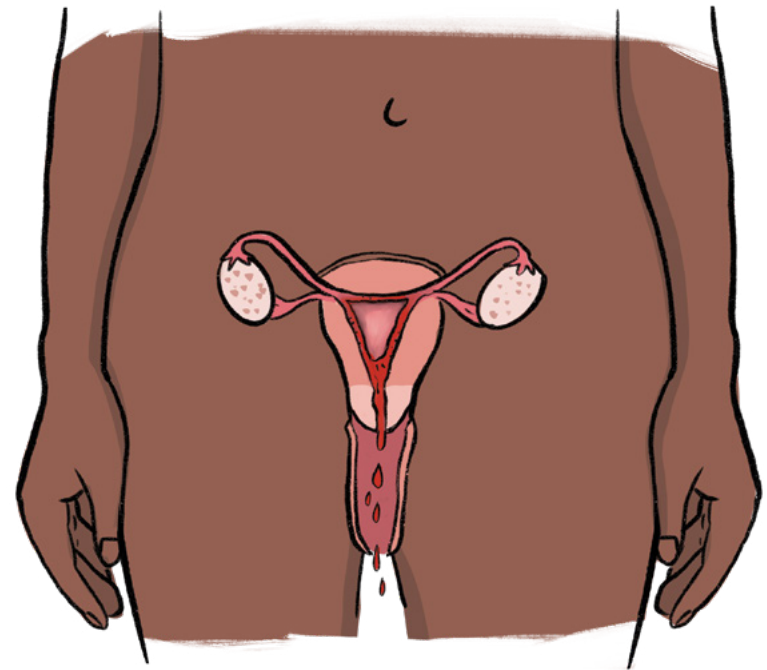
Periods are normal, healthy and not something to feel ashamed or embarrassed about.

What is a period?

A period:

- is when you bleed from your vagina every month
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Periods are normal, healthy and not something to feel ashamed or embarrassed about.



What to expect when you have your period

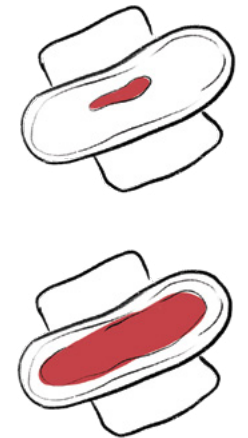
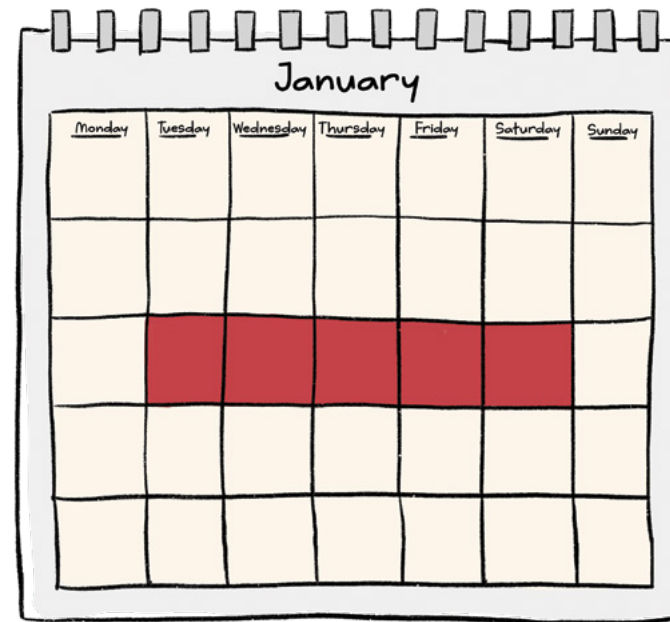
All periods are different, however it's important to know what the average period is like.

- 3–7 days bleeding about once a month.
- Blood flow can change during your period – for example, heavier at the start and lighter toward the end.
It can also change from one period to the next.
- Blood colour can range from bright red at the start to dark brown toward the end.

For the first 1–2 years after your period starts, it might not come every month.

What to expect when you have your period

- 3–7 days bleeding about once a month.
- Blood flow can change during your period.
- Blood colour can range from bright red to dark brown.



Period pain

On the first 1–2 days you might have pain in your tummy or lower back.

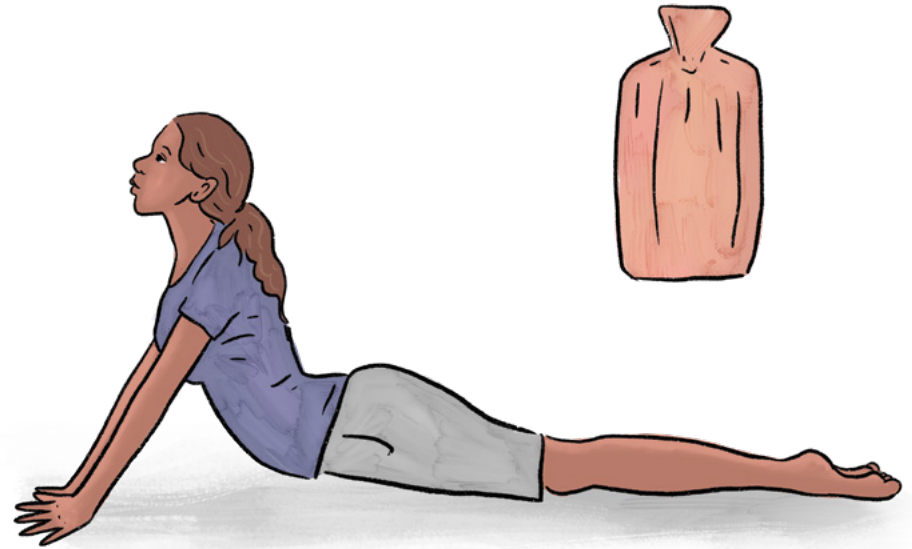
Period pain is 'normal' if:

- it is only there for the first one or two days of your period
- it can be managed by applying heat packs or hot water bottles, using medication such as ibuprofen (Nurofen™) or other period pain medication, or doing gentle exercise such as stretching or yoga
- it does not stop you from doing usual activities, such as going to school or working.

Period pain

On the first 1–2 days you might have pain in your tummy or lower back.

The pain should go away with heat packs, medicine like Nurofen™ or gentle exercise.



Period pain (continued)

Talk to your health carer if you have strong pain or the pain doesn't go away.

Your health carer might be a doctor, nurse or health worker.

Period pain

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Your health carer might be a doctor, nurse or health worker.



Symptoms before your period

Many women will experience at least 1 or 2 symptoms in the week before their period.

Possible symptoms include:

- acne and pimples
- mood changes (sad or angry)
- sore breasts
- trouble going to the toilet (constipation or diarrhoea).

Most women will experience symptoms that they can manage themselves.

If you are worried about these symptoms, talk to your health carer.

Symptoms before your period

In the week before your period you might notice:

- pimples
- mood changes (feeling sad or angry)
- sore breasts
- trouble going to the toilet (constipation or diarrhoea).



Managing your period

Pads

Pads are strips of absorbent material that sit in your underwear and absorb the blood from your period.

Pads come in different sizes such as 'light', 'medium' or 'heavy'.

You may need to change your pad every 3–4 hours when your period is heavy.

Tampons

Tampons work like a cotton plug that you insert in your vagina to absorb the blood from your period.

Tampons come in a range of different sizes to suit your flow.

You can still play sport and go swimming while wearing a tampon.

Plan to change your tampon between 3 and 6 times daily, depending on how heavy your period is.

Toxic shock syndrome is a very rare, but very serious infection that is possible when using tampons. Never leave a tampon in for more than 8 hours, always wash your hands before use, and use pads instead of tampons overnight.

Period underwear

Period underwear is underwear designed to absorb the blood from your period.

Period underwear can be used on their own, or as a backup to tampons or a menstrual cup when your period is heavy.

Reusable pads

Reusable pads are made from fabric that can be washed and reused.

Menstrual cups

Menstrual cups are silicone or rubber cups that you fold and insert into your vagina like a tampon. The cup unfolds inside your vagina and collects your period blood until you are ready to remove it, empty it, rinse it with water and reinsert. It might take some practice when you first try using a menstrual cup.

Menstrual cups come in different shapes and sizes and are safe to wear overnight.

Menstrual cups can last for 5–10 years, which makes them a cost-effective and environmentally friendly option.

Managing your period

There are products you can use to manage the blood flow when you have your period.

For example:

- pads
- tampons
- period underwear
- reusable pads
- menstrual cups.



Where to put used pads and tampons

Wrap used pads and tampons in toilet paper and put in the rubbish bin.

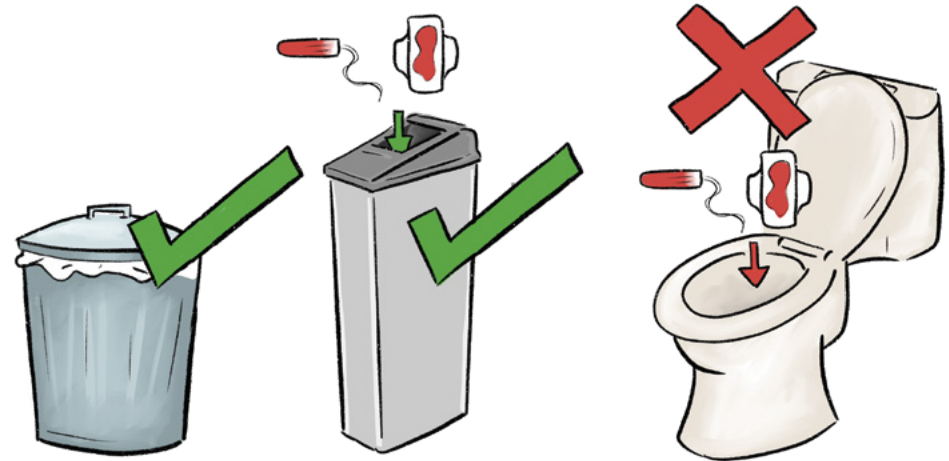
Never flush pads and tampons down the toilet.

Flushing pads and tampons can block your toilet and cause damage to plumbing, sewerage systems, wastewater treatment plants and the environment, by releasing plastics and chemicals into our rivers and oceans.

Where to put used pads and tampons

Wrap with a small amount of toilet paper and put in a rubbish bin.

Never flush pads and tampons down the toilet!



When to talk to your health carer: irregular or absent periods

Talk to your health carer if your period:

- doesn't come every month
- doesn't come at the same time every month,
or
- doesn't come at all.

Periods that don't come every month, don't come at the same time every month, or don't come at all can be caused by lots of conditions.

If your period is like this, it's important to talk to your health carer.

When to talk to your health carer

Talk to your health carer if you're worried about your period.

You can talk to your health carer if your period:

- doesn't come every month
- doesn't come at the same time every month,
or
- doesn't come at all.



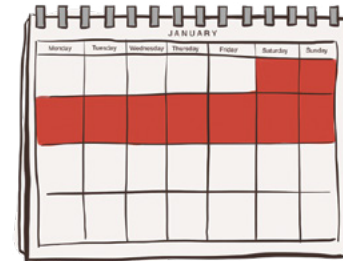
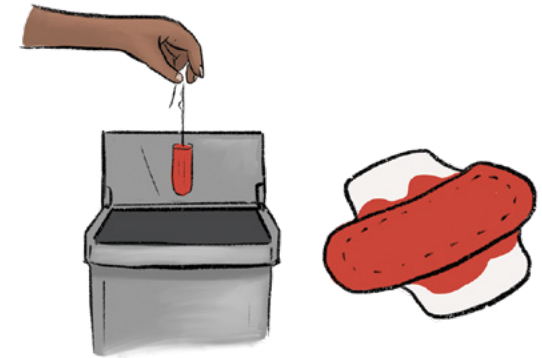
When to talk to your health carer: heavy bleeding

Talk to your health carer if you:

- bleed so much that you have to change your pad or tampon every 2 hours or less, or during the night
- bleed for longer than 7–8 days
- bleed through to your clothes.

When to talk to your health carer

You can talk to your health carer if you have heavy bleeding.



When to talk to your health carer: period pain

Pain so bad that you are unable to go to work, school or other activities, or that doesn't go away with medication such as ibuprofen (Nurofen™), is not normal.

Really bad pain can be caused by lots of different conditions, so it is important to get it checked out and treated.

Talk to your health carer if you have bad period pain that stops you from doing things.

When to talk to your health carer

You can talk to your health carer if you have bad period pain that stops you from doing things.



Keep track of your period

Tracking your menstrual cycle, including physical and emotional symptoms, can help you notice if you need to see a health carer. It is a good way to:

- understand your period better
- know when your period is due, and be ready for it
- help you to notice changes in what's normal for you, so you know if you need to see a health carer.

How to track your period

Track your period using a calendar, diary or smartphone app.

Track when your period starts, how long it lasts and any symptoms like pain or heavy bleeding.

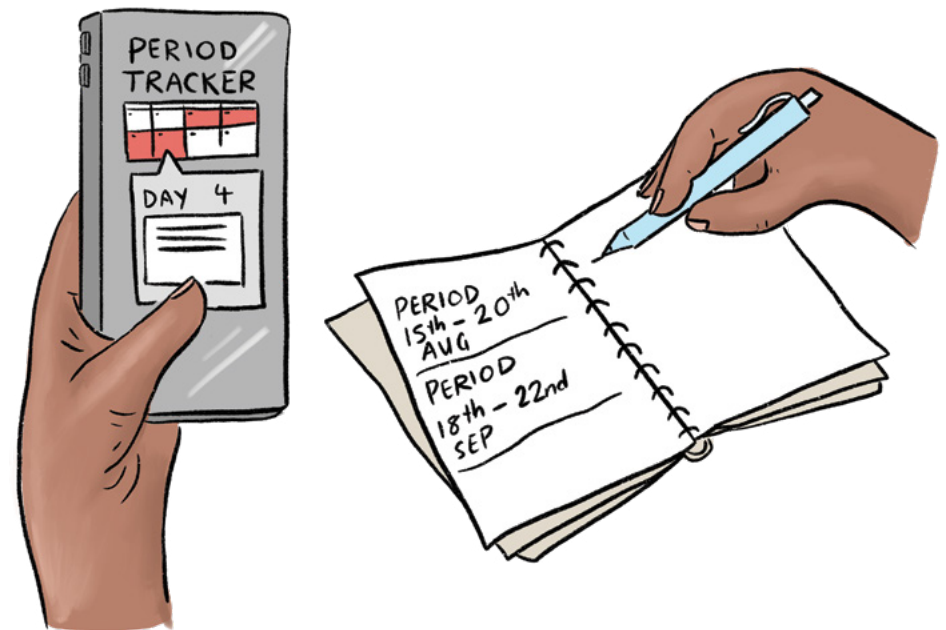
This is all useful information if you need to see a health carer about your period.

Keep track of your period

It's good to keep track of your period. You can use:

- a calendar
- a diary
- an app.

This information will help if you need to see a health carer.



Remember

1. Keep track of your period.
2. Talk to your health carer if you are worried about your period.



For further information contact

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Melbourne VIC 3001

Phone 03 9453 8999

Email education@jeanhailes.org.au

Website jeanhailes.org.au

Disclaimer: This information does not replace medical advice. If a person is worried about their health, they should talk to their doctor or healthcare team.

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Created September 2022

