

The Four Phases of the Menstrual Cycle

Women operate on a 28 day hormone cycle composed of four phases, the menstrual phase, the follicular phase, the ovulatory phase, and the luteal phase.

Most women are probably familiar with the menstrual phase, and the ovulatory phase but many are not taught about all four phases in school, or how they affect the body, and each phase can affect the body in very drastic ways. Women can go through life feeling completely different week to week without even knowing why. If you've ever experienced the feeling of being on top of the world for a week, and then down in the slumps the next with no real logic or reasoning behind it, odds are you're just transitioning from your ovulation phase to the luteal phase. These phases can go so far as to alter our face shape, in addition to our weight, and mood, so no, it's not all in your head.

I was one of those women who grew up not knowing about each of these four phases or really having any understanding of how my body worked and what it was designed to do. It took years of my adult life to learn this information and get in tune enough with my body to embrace these changes that we go through every month.

I've broken down the four phases of the menstrual cycle below. While researching for this article it became clear to me that we are still learning about a lot of this information. Women's health has not been researched or studied the same way men have. It just recently became known that women do in fact need more sleep than men, and the amount of sleep they need may vary at different times of the month. It seemed clear to me through my reading that the human body is complex, and this is a fluid cycle with some phases overlapping each other, some

phases shorter, some longer but all equally important.

The menstrual phase:

The menstrual phase begins on the first day of your cycle and lasts anywhere between 3-7 days. Typically 3-5 days is considered healthy, 7 days is normal. Any longer than that is an indicator that your hormones are unbalanced, or a symptom of a greater problem. The menstrual phase is the shedding of the uterine lining to rid the body of the unfertilized egg.

We're all familiar with this. We often feel cranky and exhausted because our body is working over time. That being said, the menstrual cycle doesn't have to be a time of extreme pain or discomfort. With a healthy diet and lifestyle, cramps can be eliminated. This is a great time to rest a little more than you usually would. Maybe do some yoga rather than a HITT class (although if you have the energy for an intensive workout, by all means go with the flow) This is a great time to get an extra hour of sleep at night or even take a nap if your lifestyle allows for it. Warm easy to digest foods can be a comfort during this phase of your cycle.

Unfortunately, we live in a world where most people are forced to work all day outside the home regardless of the phase of their cycle, and they are constantly going against their body's intuition, and are often expected to perform at the same level as they would in their follicular or ovulatory phase when their energy levels are higher.

It is my personal opinion that this has created a generation of women who are both entirely out of tune with their natural cycles, and also deeply hateful towards their natural cycles, thinking of them as something to be suppressed and avoided at all costs instead of what really is- the ability to create and grow life, which is undoubtedly the greatest gift.

During the menstrual phase the body is shedding its uterine

lining to release your body's unfertilized egg. It is common during this phase to gain weight, although it is mostly water weight and will come back off in your follicular phase.

Follicular phase:

Your follicular phase is the longest phase in the menstrual cycle, it begins on the first day of menstruation and ends when you begin ovulation. On the tail end of your follicular phase, after menstruation ends you will likely notice your energy levels start to rise again. Your follicular phase is responsible for your egg being released from the ovaries for fertilization. One egg will reach maturity faster than the others and will be released from the ovarian follicles, through the fallopian tube. During this time, your body transitions into ovulation, and the egg is either fertilized and you become pregnant, or the egg dies and is released during your period.

Ovulation phase:

This is typically your highest energy time of your cycle, and obviously, when you are ovulating. Your ovulation cycle is actually the only time you can get pregnant during your cycle, and your ovulation phase is typically around six days. During your ovulation phase your body is releasing an egg from your ovaries to allow it the opportunity to be fertilized. This time period is only 24-48 hours generally, and if the egg is not fertilized in this time, it will die, and be released during your period. The entire ovulation phase lasts about 6 days. Sperm can last in the uterus for up to 6 days before it dies, and if you have active sperm in your uterus within your ovulation window, then there is a good chance your egg will be fertilized.

This is important for cycle tracking and syncing. If you're using the family planning method of birth control, it is

imperative to know when your ovulation window is so you know when you are most at risk of getting pregnant.

Unfortunately, or fortunately depending on your current situation, this is when women naturally have the highest libido. Your body is quite literally preparing itself for sex, because this is the time when you should have sex in order to get pregnant. Try as you might, biology can be hard to fight. You may notice your libido increase during this time, your discharge may become thinner, and there may be more of it, and if you track your body's basal body temperature, you'll notice a slight increase in temperature around this time.

Ovulation typically takes place 14 days before menstruation, in a healthy 28 day cycle. As previously mentioned, this is typically the highest energy phase of your cycle. This is a great time for intensive cardio or HITT workouts. Women often talk about feeling "unstoppable" or "on top of the world" during the ovulation phase, many women experience an increase in dopamine, and overall happy feelings.

Many women, even those who are not particularly in tune may notice a difference in their appearance, or feel more attractive during ovulation. We've all felt the menstruation slump, feeling kind of blah right before or on your period but not everyone is in tune enough to experience the opposite while ovulating. But if you have ever experienced this- it's not just you, and it's not all in your head. There's a kind of aura one radiates during ovulation- an aura of fertility. On a biological level, fertility is very attractive to people. It's a sign of health, youth, and vitality. You're less bloated, we experience an increase in estrogen, which can quite literally make your skin "glow" some women even notice a very subtle change in their face shape, and if you have a partner who is very in tune, and you live a natural lifestyle, they may even be able to smell when you're ovulating as our pheromones can change slightly, making us smell better to certain people.

Luteal phase:

The luteal phase is the last phase of your cycle occurring after ovulation. The uterine lining and cervical mucus thicken to either prepare for pregnancy or to be shed and the egg is released into the uterus either for fertilization or to be released from the body. This is the phase of your cycle where you're likely to experience PMS symptoms. Estrogen and progesterone levels rise. At this point either the egg is fertilized and ready for pregnancy, or you shed your uterine lining and begin the process over again.

As this is the phase where you experience "PMS" fatigue, irritability and bloating are all common symptoms of this phase of your cycle. Taking B vitamins regularly leading up to your luteal phase and through your period can help alleviate some of the worse symptoms of your luteal phase, including mood swings and premenstrual depression. Eating a balanced and diverse diet full of whole foods and vegetables, and generally living a healthy lifestyle can also help eliminate these symptoms. If you do all these things, and still find that you are fatigued or drained during this time of the month, that is common and even normal. An extra hour of sleep or an afternoon nap if possible can help with this. Sometimes the best thing you can do is listen to your body, especially if your body is generally functioning at healthy optimum levels.

Birth Control:

Just in case you were wondering- hormonal birth control negates ALL of this. Hormonal birth control doesn't even allow for ovulation.

In fact, hormonal birth control only works because it prevents the natural process of ovulation, making sure the egg cannot be fertilized. There has been all sorts of research to indicate that hormonal birth control can radically change our

bodies' natural cycles, and affect us in radical ways, down to who we're attracted to.

Research indicates that women on hormonal birth control are typically attracted to less "manly" men, or men who are lower in testosterone. There have been instances of women getting off hormonal birth control and later breaking up with their partners because they are no longer attracted to them, having had their preferences so skewed that they were with someone who did not align with their actual natural preferences in a partner. The book "Your Brain on Birth Control" talks more about this phenomenon.

Each of our hormonal phases serves a different purpose and has value. Modern conditions and health standards have painted a picture of a tortured 10 days of mood swings, followed by bleeding, and cramps. Just because this is the prevailing narrative doesn't mean that this is healthy or normal. Women can experience pain free periods, and menstruation can be a time to honor your body's natural gift of bearing children. Even I have a hard time with this, it feels each month when my period comes around I'm once again reminded that I am no step closer to having a baby, and the bleeding isn't what'd I'd call fun or comfortable, but still it doesn't have to be a miserable week and you can do everything your normally would, without the need for pain medication or hormonal birth control. Learning about these phases is an important step to getting in tune with your body.