

[OB-GYN NEWS]

# solve period puzzles

Five common menstrual irregularities explained. *by Jennifer Pirtle*

**E**VEN THE HEALTHIEST women experience occasional blips in their menstrual cycles, but how do you know whether to chalk them up to lunar shifts or to something more serious? “Time zone travel and medications such as steroids or antibiotics can all temporarily affect a woman’s period,” says Orli Etingin, M.D., director of the Iris Cantor Women’s Health Center at NewYork Weill Cornell Medical Center. “Changes should be checked by a doctor if they occur for two or more cycles in a row.”

Out-of-kilter periods can signal underlying health problems. In some cases, erratic menstruation may indicate metabolic abnormalities that raise disease risk.

Below are five of the most common period permutations and what to ask your OB-GYN to check for.

## Bleeding between periods

A dip in estrogen around ovulation can cause midcycle spotting. “Repeated spotting over two or more cycles could also be a sign of an ovarian cyst, endometriosis, or a uterine polyp,” Etingin says. If you’re taking oral contraceptives, off-cycle bleeding may mean that your pill’s estrogen content is too low (this is fairly common with some of the newer low-

dose tablets). Ask your doctor to prescribe a different brand.

## Missing a month

As with other menstrual disturbances, skipping is often induced by stress: A major life change or sudden weight gain or loss can disrupt your schedule. Missed periods can also signal premature ovarian failure (POF), a mysterious condition that causes ovaries to stop producing eggs and reproductive hormones, sometimes decades before menopause. POF increases a woman’s risk of osteoporosis, so early diagnosis is a must.

## Shortening/lengthening of your cycle

Shorter periods often occur when a woman isn’t ovulating and the uterus doesn’t shed all its lining. One explanation: natural hormone shifts that happen when a woman enters her 40s. Lengthening cycles

become an issue when a woman is trying to get pregnant. “It may be difficult to determine when she ovulates,” Etingin says. “She may have to have hormonal testing to determine the exact date.”

## Barely bleeding

An extra-light flow usually means the uterine lining hasn’t built up much and can simply signify that you haven’t ovulated. If light periods become the norm, they could point to fertility problems; in some cases, an overactive thyroid could be to blame.

## Crippling cramps

Intensely painful periods that get worse each month could be a sign of endometriosis, a disease that affects between 10 and 20 percent of American women of childbearing age. For unknown reasons, the tissue lining the uterus migrates to places in the body it shouldn’t.



PERIOD PAIN?  
Get to the root  
of the problem.