

# How a Woman's Reproductive System Works

Women's ovaries make three hormones: estrogen, progesterone, and some testosterone.

The menstrual cycle is the days between the start of one menstrual period and the start of the next menstrual period

*Each month:*

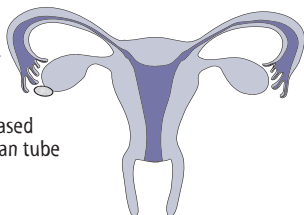
## Normal Cycle

Estrogen

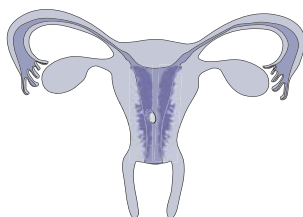


The estrogen tells the ovary to develop an egg to release.

The egg is released into the fallopian tube



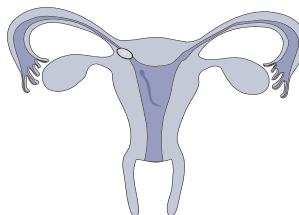
Once the egg has been released, progesterone signals the uterus to make a soft, thick lining, just in case the egg is fertilized. The progesterone also stops the ovary from developing and releasing new eggs



When an egg does not become fertilized, the body stops making the progesterone and the lining of the uterus stops thickening. Within about 14 days after the release of the egg, the thickened lining of the uterus sheds. This is called menstruation or a period.

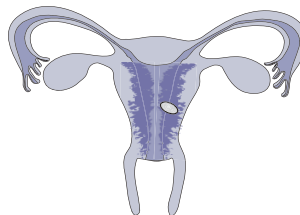
## Fertilization

If a woman is having sex during the time the egg is traveling down the fallopian tube and not using birth control, the egg may, together with a sperm, form a fertilized egg (the beginning cells of a baby).

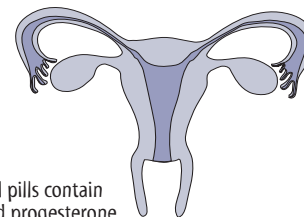
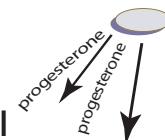


The egg then travels to the uterus.

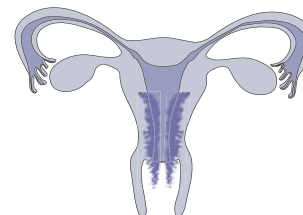
Once the egg has been released, progesterone signals the uterus to make a soft thick lining, for the egg to grow.



## Birth Control Pill



Most birth control pills contain both estrogen and progesterone. Progesterone in the pill signals the body not to develop an egg so pregnancy does not occur.



Because an egg is not released, pregnancy does not occur. The lining of the uterus does not thicken as it would to prepare for a fertilized egg. The estrogen in the pill keeps the normal lining of the uterus from breaking down. During the pill-free week, the lining of the uterus dissolves, causing a period.

## What Happens if I Take Active Pills for More Than 21 Days in a Row?

Whether you take an active pill for 21 days and then the placebo pill for 7 days or take an active pill for 60 or even 90 days straight, the effect of the pill on your reproductive system is the same. Except with the 21-day pill, you bleed more often (during the placebo-pill week). The birth control pill was designed to mimic a woman's menstrual cycle. However, there is no health reason for women on the pill to bleed every month.

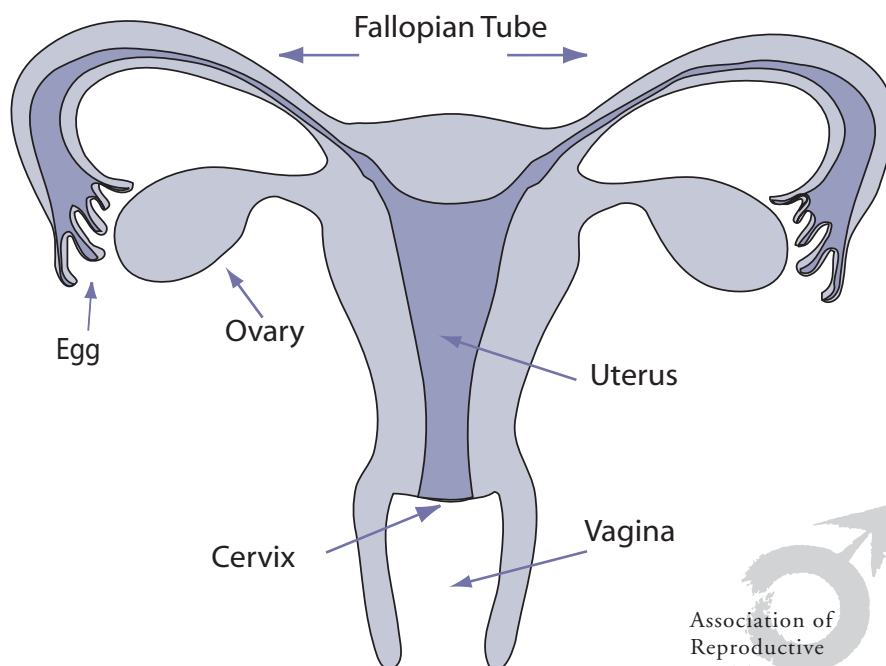
Women who take more than 21 pills in a row can expect to have fewer periods over the course of a year. For example, a woman taking pills 3 months in a row followed by a week off will have only four periods a year. There is no danger in taking the pill this way.

Most women who start the pill for the very first time will have spotting or bleeding in between the time from one period to the next as their body adjusts. The same thing is true for women who begin taking pills for more than 21 days in a row. Wearing a panty liner might be advisable during these first few months.

The spotting is NOT a sign that there is something wrong. Eventually a woman's body gets used to the pills, and the spotting stops. The longer a woman takes the continuous pills, the less frequently spotting will happen.

Your health care professional, doctor, or nurse practitioner can help you with questions about what you might expect from taking active pills for more than 21 days in a row.

## A Woman's Reproductive System



Association of  
Reproductive  
Health  
Professionals

2401 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Suite 350  
Washington, DC 20037-1718  
www.arhp.org