



Women's Health in 2021

Our experts answer your questions on all things women's health from the menstrual cycle, sexual health, pregnancy and menopause.

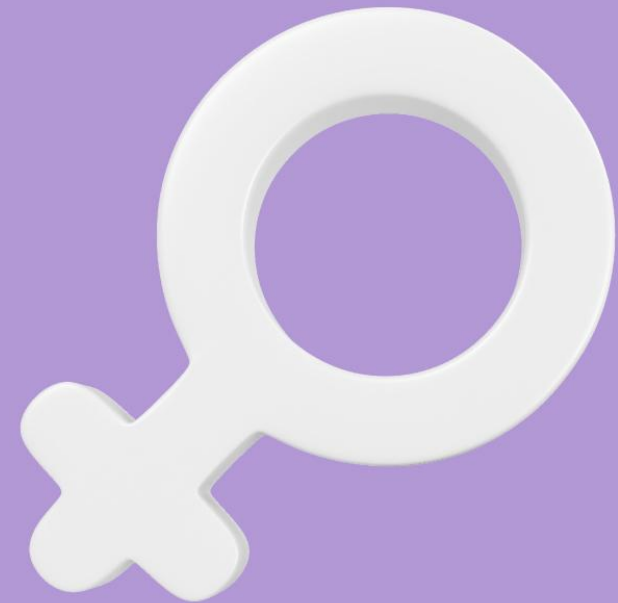


Women's Health Matters

At Babylon we believe women's health matters. That's why our team of experts have come together to create this resource filled with advice and information on how women can take control of their physical and mental health.

Here are 5 things you can do today to look after your health:

1. **Be breast aware.** Check your breasts once a month and get familiar with the way they look and feel. Check one week after your period and take at least 60 seconds to check for lumps, bumps or any changes.
2. **Speak to a healthcare professional if you have any concerns or notice any changes to your breast or nipples** such as a new lump in the breast or armpit area, nipple discharge or bleeding, changes to the nipple such as it pointing inward, discomfort or pain in the breast.
3. **If you've been invited, attend your cervical or breast screening.** During a cervical screening appointment, a small sample of cells are gently brushed from your cervix to check for abnormal cells. It is a quick test that is often not painful. Breast screening is done using a mammogram. This involves taking an x-ray of your breasts and can detect cancer early, when it may be too small to feel.
4. **Remember this.** Always speak to a healthcare professional if you're experiencing bleeding in between periods or after intercourse, have unusual discharge or pain during sex. These can be signs of cervical cancer.
5. **Maintain a healthy lifestyle.** Exercise regularly, maintain a healthy body weight, quit smoking and limit drinking alcohol, in order to improve your overall health



Ask our experts

Menstrual Health

Our expert | **Dr Elise Dallas** (Babylon GP)



Heavy and painful periods

Periods are a major part of a woman's life, so it's important to be familiar with your cycle. Heavy and painful periods are common and can have a big impact on a woman's everyday life. Below we've included some information on how to know what a 'normal' period is and the signs you should look out for and consult a healthcare professional about.

Heavy and painful periods are common but it's important to be aware that if your period is interfering with your life then really you should speak to a healthcare professional about it.

80% people suffer period pain but about 10% experience severe enough pain to be crippled up in bed to take time off work or school - this is not normal and certainly shouldn't be accepted.
¹Endometriosis is a condition that affects up to 10% of women yet it takes an average of 7 1/2 years to diagnose².

Facts³

- **1 in 5 women** experience heavy periods but only 1 In 3 women suffering heavy periods have spoken to their doctor
- **Over 60% of women** have had to miss social or athletic events due to their period
- **33% women** say they have been forced to miss work because of their period
- **74% of women** with heavy periods experience anxiety

¹<https://www.endometriosis-uk.org/endometriosis-facts-and-figures>

²<https://www.womens-health-concern.org/help-and-advice/factsheets/period-pain/>

³National Women's Health Resource Center. Survey of women who experience heavy menstrual bleeding Data on file; 2005.
<https://www.wearwhiteagain.co.uk/heavy-periods/>





Signs to look out for and to speak to a healthcare professional about:

1. Bleeding for longer than 7 days
2. Have to change your pad or tampon every 1 to 2 hours
3. Pass clots of blood larger than a 10p coin (2.5cm)
4. Bleed through clothes or onto your bedding, even when using a pad or tampon
5. Need to use pads and tampons together to prevent leakage
6. Feel tired or weak during your period
7. Often have to cancel plans or activities because of your period

Some flows are just heavier by nature, in fact 50% of women diagnosed with heavy periods find there is no underlying cause.

Most common health-related causes:

- Fibroids
- Endometriosis

Just because a cause cannot be found doesn't mean we can't help manage our periods. Book a consultation with a Babylon clinician today to find a solution.



Endometriosis - causes, complications & treatment

Endometriosis is a condition where tissue similar to the lining of the womb (endometrial tissue) starts to grow outside the womb (uterus) in other places, such as in the pelvis, ovaries and fallopian tubes.

The exact cause of endometriosis is not known but it is dependent on the same hormones that change and bring on your period. When your endometrial tissue lining your uterus bleeds - so does endometrial-like tissue located outside the womb bleed. This bleeding can cause pain, inflammation and scarring, and can possibly damage your pelvic organs leading to possible infertility.

How do I know if I have endometriosis?

Typical symptoms include period pain - which often starts a few days before the period and usually persists through the whole period, sometimes radiating to lower back or the tops of your legs, in contrast to 'normal' period pain where the pain usually starts with the period (of a few hours before) and eases after the first few days. It is the cyclical nature of the pain that suggests the diagnosis of endometriosis but this can progress to become a chronic and continuous pain.

You may also have cyclical pain related to your bowel - painful bowel movements or cyclical urinary symptoms, in particular blood in urine or pain passing urine.

It can interfere with your sex life and cause deep pain during or after sex. Adhesions can lead to infertility so it should be considered if you have been trying to get pregnant for over one year.

Why does it take so long to diagnose?

Because endometriosis manifests itself in a variety of ways, diagnosis can be difficult and often delayed. Many women do not feel confident discussing the period problems they have because they do not realise that what they are experiencing is not normal and they may feel embarrassed to discuss concerns. 62% of women put off going to the doctor with symptoms of endometriosis. But more importantly, the lack of awareness is allowing endometriosis to remain undetected in so many women.

⁴Menstrual Wellbeing Toolkit. <https://www.rcgp.org.uk/menstrualwellbeingtoolkit>

⁵NHS UK. Sexual Health <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sexual-health/>

Ask our experts

Sexual Health

Our expert | **Madison Levine LMFT & Dr Kimya Tarr (Behavioural Health Lead and Babylon GP)**



Sexual health basics

Get tested

STDs/STIs can affect anyone who is sexually active. Whether symptoms appear or not (50% of women & 10% of men with gonorrhoea show no symptoms), it's important to communicate with your partner about your sexual history and get tested for STIs after each new partner.

Know your options

Age, sexual choices and health risks all play a role in testing and treating STIs. Speak to a healthcare professional to determine which testing and treatment options are best for you.

Contraception

You can't talk about sex without talking about pregnancy and contraception, which could be a condom, contraceptive pill, IUD, contraceptive injection, vaginal ring, contraceptive patch or natural family planning. Speak to a healthcare professional to determine which method is best suited to your needs and lifestyle.

Emergency contraception

Whether you've had unprotected sex or worry your contraception may have failed, there are still post-sex options to prevent pregnancy, including an emergency IUD and Plan B (the "morning after" pill). These methods can work up to five days after unprotected sex, but should be used as soon as possible to increase the chances of efficacy.

The ups & downs of libido

Mental Health & Libido

Low libido can be linked to anxiety and stress. Clinical anxiety and depression are also linked to decreased sexual desire. A trained therapist can help to:

- Address traumas, notions of sex, cultural differences related to sex within a couple
- Explore sex in a safe and healthy way
- Sort through relationship issues that might be decreasing sexual desire

Physical Causes of Lower Libido

- **Age**
Sexual desire can change in women throughout their life. Studies show it's actually strongest in a woman's 30s and 40s, but then steadily decreases in the following years.
- **Vaginal dryness**
Dryness during sex could be caused by menopause, breastfeeding, emotional factors, painful sex, or contraceptive or anxiety/depression medications. Speak to a doctor about the causes and try water-based lubricants during sex to increase moisture.
- **Vaginismus**
Vaginismus is characterized by sudden tightening in the vagina when trying to insert something, which can cause pain or discomfort (burning or stinging pain). Speak to your doctor or a mental health therapist to discuss what factors could be at play and how to treat it. Most often vaginismus is caused by:
 - Fear of sex or other emotional factors
 - Past sexual abuse or trauma
 - Past experiences of painful intercourse



Infertility - you're not alone

About 84% of couples can naturally conceive within a year of having regular, unprotected sex, leaving 16% of couples that struggle to become pregnant⁷. There are many factors at play, including a woman's age, but studies have shown that up to 40% of women in fertility clinics have endometriosis⁸, which causes the tissue that lines the uterus to grow outside of it and even attach itself to other organs, including the ovaries and fallopian tubes. The scarring and painful inflammation from this condition can cause infertility. Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) and some untreated STIs, like chlamydia, are also associated with infertility issues so speak to a healthcare professional about any unusual symptoms related to your period or vaginal health.

Beside treating endometriosis, PCOS and STIs as early as possible, a few ways to increase both men and women's fertilities include:

- Maintain a healthy weight
- Eat a balanced diet
- Reduce caffeine intake
- Stop smoking & reduce alcohol intake
- Supplements: women can take folic acid⁹ and vitamin D¹⁰, and men can take zinc

The mental toll infertility takes on both men and women can be difficult. Therapy and support groups can be useful tools for getting through that challenging time and reducing stress, which is also associated with infertility.



⁷NHS UK <https://www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/trying-for-a-baby/how-long-it-takes-to-get-pregnant/>

⁸<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4286960/>

⁹Medivizor

<https://medivizor.com/blog/SampleLibrary/infertility-reproductive-technologies/does-folic-acid-help-increase-the-chances-of-getting-pregnant/#:~:text=Studies%20suggest%20that%20folic%20acid,when%20taking%20folic%20acid%20supplements>

¹⁰Science Direct <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0015028219323714>



Pregnancy in the pandemic

Prenatal fears

The pandemic has made pregnancy an especially challenging experience for many women and forced them to adapt to a new picture of what pregnancy looks like. With many hospitals allowing only one person in the room, visits, appointments, scans and deliveries have also shifted due to the restrictions around the pandemic. Many women are lonely and scared as they worry about possibly having to navigate this experience on their own. Here are a few tips from Dr. Elise Dallas to make the experience easier:

- Group scans and tests together to reduce the number of visits, and attend all essential appointments to ensure mother and baby are healthy
- Check with your hospital for visitation guidelines, which vary between states and countries
- Ask about virtual appointments, as some can be carried out over the phone or on video
- Stay flexible for possible changes to location or guidelines

Postnatal depression and loneliness

Many people are experiencing loneliness in an entirely new way during the pandemic, but new mothers are being hit especially hard. In fact, the PANDAS foundation reported a 240% rise in calls related to postnatal depression since 2019¹¹. The postnatal period is exhausting during normal times, but mothers are usually able to connect with family, friends and other first-time mothers. Pandemic restrictions, however, have made it difficult to connect with other women that are currently going through or have gone through the same experience. According to Madison Levine, although we are isolated, we don't have to lose connection. She encourages new mothers to set up weekly phone calls with family and friends, and find virtual communities to join and connect with other women.

¹¹Sky News,
<https://news.sky.com/story/post-natal-depression-number-of-cases-among-men-and-women-has-risen-over-past-year-12231296>

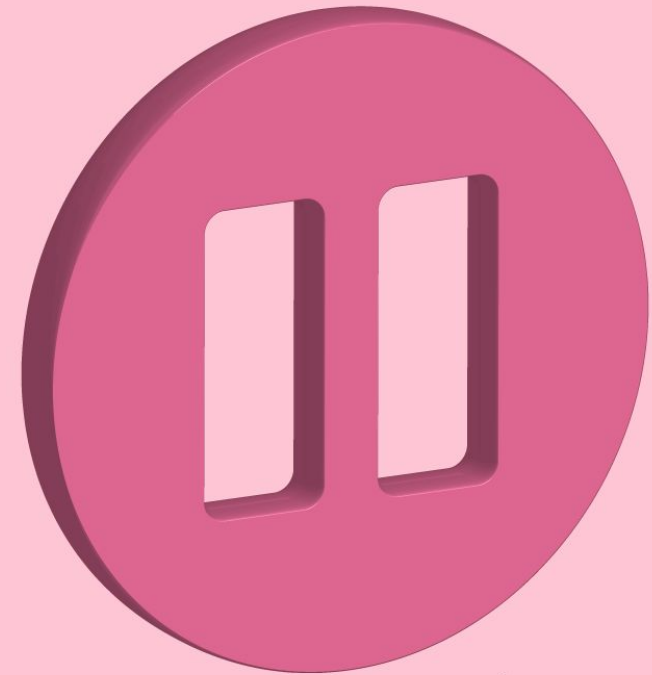
Menopause for thought

The menopause is a natural part of ageing and for most women in the UK and US this usually occurs between 45 and 55 years of age, with the average age being 51 years .

If you're younger than 45, it is called an early menopause. Around 1 in 100 women experience the menopause before the age of 40¹². This is known as a premature menopause, or Premature Ovarian Insufficiency (POI).

Menopause occurs because as you age your ovaries stop producing eggs (natural) or your ovaries have been removed (surgically due to cancer or other reasons) and the amount of oestrogen (the main female hormone) in your body falls. Despite the menopause being a natural event that every woman will go through at some point - it is sometimes difficult to work out whether you are 'starting the change'.

This can be because symptoms usually start a few months or years before your periods stop and can persist for some time afterwards, **lasting on average 7 years**. If you are not aware of what the symptoms are then you may not realise you are perimenopausal.



¹² Local Government Association
<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/workforce-and-hr-support/wellbeing/menopause/menopause-factfile#:~:text=But%20around%20one%20in%20100,period%20leading%20up%20to%20menopause.>



So what are the common symptoms?

Many people are experiencing loneliness in an entirely new way during the pandemic, but new mothers are being hit especially hard. In fact, the PANDAS foundation reported a 240% rise in calls related to postnatal depression since 2019¹¹. The postnatal period is exhausting during normal times, but mothers are usually able to connect with family, friends and other first-time mothers. Pandemic restrictions, however, have made it difficult to connect with other women that are currently going through or have gone through the same experience. According to Madison Levine, although we are isolated, we don't have to lose connection. She encourages new mothers to set up weekly phone calls with family and friends, and find virtual communities to join and connect with other women.

- The first sign of the menopause is usually a **change in the normal pattern** of your periods which could be lighter or heavier or become less or more frequent and eventually they will stop altogether. If there is spotting between periods or spotting after sex, then do speak to a healthcare professional as this could possibly be abnormal bleeding.
- Then there are the menopausal symptoms which **over 80% of women will experience** due to that dropping level of oestrogen, with **about 25% of women having very severe symptoms**. The most common ones are:
 - Vasomotor symptoms e.g. the well-known **hot flushes** and **night sweats**
 - Psychological symptoms e.g. **depression** and **lack of concentration**, typically referred to as '**brain fog**'
 - Joint and muscle pain
 - Genitourinary syndrome of menopause e.g. **vaginal dryness**, **burning urination**, **recurrent urine infections** and **reduced libido**

These symptoms can be non-existent, last for a few years, or even decades.

It may be hard for a woman or even a clinician to recognise that she may be premenopausal as some symptoms can seem quite vague - like hair loss, weight gain, bloating, palpitations, incontinence, fatigue, dizziness. So, it is important if you are having changes to your periods and symptoms to consider that falling oestrogen could be the cause.

Not all changes in your body and wellbeing at this time may be because of your menopause. But it is important to consider the menopause as a cause and consider your wider health and seek medical advice.

Just because over 50% of the population will experience menopause and menopausal symptoms are quite 'normal', that doesn't mean you shouldn't consult a healthcare professional to help manage your symptoms and determine which treatments can help manage the discomfort.

If you find that you are struggling to manage the symptoms or that they are impacting on your quality of life, book an appointment with a healthcare professional. They will look at your age, period frequency and symptoms and should be able to tell if you're perimenopausal.

If you're experiencing symptoms of the menopause before 45 years of age, it is important to speak to a clinician and receive the correct management.



Cervical screening and breast awareness

If all eligible women had a smear test, around 83% of cervical cancer deaths could be prevented.¹³

In the UK every three years every woman aged 25 to 49 gets a letter through the post inviting them to book a cervical screening. Women aged 50 to 64 are invited every five years¹⁴. Cervical cancer is the most common cancer in women under 35¹⁵ which is why it's important to attend for cervical screening if you have been invited. During the smear test a small sample of cells are taken from your cervix. It takes 5 minutes and shouldn't hurt.

Women with early cervical cancers or pre-cancers usually have no symptoms, but it is important to speak to a healthcare professional if you're experiencing bleeding in between periods/after intercourse, unusual discharge or pain during sex. Breast cancer also remains the 2nd most common cancer worldwide, after lung cancer. When diagnosed at its earliest stage, 98% of people with breast cancer will survive their disease for five years or more, compared with 26% of people when the disease is diagnosed at the latest stages¹⁶. Regardless of your age, it is important to be breast aware and have a good understanding of breast changes that warrant booking an appointment with a healthcare professional for a check-up.

¹³Nursing Practice <https://www.nursinginpractice.com/latest-news/cervical-screening-could-save-350-more-lives-each-year/#:~:text=If%20every%20eligible%20woman%20attended,Research%20UK%20study%20has%20found.>

¹⁴Cancer Research UK <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/cervical-cancer/getting-diagnosed/screening/about#:~:text=The%20NHS%20cervical%20screening%20programme.to%20get%20your%20screening%20invitations.>

¹⁵NHS Leeds <https://www.leedsccg.nhs.uk/content/uploads/2018/03/Cervical-Cancer-Campaign-A5-leaflet.pdf>

¹⁶Cancer Research UK, <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/health-professional/cancer-statistics/statistics-by-cancer-type/breast-cancer#heading-Three>

Breast cancer signs vary, however look out for the following symptoms and speak to your doctor if you have any concerns:

New lump

Some breasts are naturally more lumpy than others, and a new lump isn't necessarily going to be cancerous either. But it isn't easy to know whether a new lump is anything to worry about or not without it being examined, or sometimes scanned, by a healthcare professional. So if you find a new lump, it is best to have it checked out.

Swelling

Most breasts are wonky and pretty much everyone has one breast bigger than the other, so the key here is to know what is normal for you. If your breast is swelling or enlarging, have it looked at by your doctor.

Pitting and dimpling

Commonly called 'orange peel skin', because the dimpling looks like pitting on the surface of an orange, this change to your breast tissue can be a sign of breast cancer.

Nipple changes

Don't forget about your nipples. For example, rashes of the nipple or a nipple that starts to be pulled inwards (inverted nipple) can be signs of breast cancer. Between 10% and 20% of women normally have flat or inverted nipples, but if you've never had inverted nipples and you see it happening, see a healthcare professional.

Colour changes

Redness or bruising of the breast (that can't be explained by an injury) should be seen by a doctor as breast cancer can cause such changes.

Armpit swelling

Breast cancer can affect the lymph nodes, many of which lie in the armpit. If you feel a lump or lumps in your armpit, upper chest or neck, it is best to get them checked out.

Persistent pain

Breast and chest pain is very common. Pain is frequently due to muscle pains after a rigorous workout, or due to hormonal changes during the menstrual cycle. However breast pain that isn't improving, or that seems to persist throughout the menstrual cycle should ideally be checked out.



Information

For more information or to speak to our mental health experts, please contact Babylon's press team:

Email: press@babylonhealth.com