Bodyworks

Your guide to understanding reproduction
Bodyworks

This leaflet will tell you all about the reproductive system in men and women. It's particularly useful if you want to understand:

- how the reproductive organs work
- the menstrual cycle (periods)
- what's involved in conception (getting pregnant)
- how contraception works to prevent pregnancy.

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Women’s bodies

The reproductive system in women is made up of external and internal organs. These are found in the lower abdomen, the part of the body below the umbilicus (tummy button). This area is often referred to as the pelvic area. They include:

**The external organs**
- vaginal entrance (opening)
- labia (vaginal lips)
- clitoris

The external organs are known as the vulva.

**The internal organs**
- uterus (womb)
- fallopian tubes
- ovaries
- vagina
- cervix

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The female reproductive organs outside the body

The **vulva** includes the opening to the **vagina**, the inner and outer lips (called **labia**) and the **clitoris**. The external part of the clitoris is found towards the front of the vulva, it is highly sensitive and when stimulated can make women feel sexually aroused and lead to orgasm.

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**Hormones and eggs – did you know?**

- The female sex hormones, **estrogen** and **progesterone**, are responsible for female characteristics such as body shape, developing breasts, periods and controlling the **menstrual cycle**.
- When a woman reaches puberty she will have up to 1 million **eggs** in her ovaries.
- During a woman’s reproductive life only about 400–500 eggs will actually be released at **ovulation**.
- As a woman gets older (over 30 years) the number and quality of her eggs declines making **conception** more difficult.
- An egg is less than 1/8 of the size of a grain of sand – invisible to the naked eye.

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The female reproductive organs inside the body

**Ovaries**

Women have 2 **ovaries**, one on each side of the **uterus**. Ovaries are the size and shape of almonds and they contain **ova** (eggs) in structures called **follicles**. The ovaries also produce the 2 female sex hormones – **estrogen** and **progesterone**.
The fallopian tubes

The 2 fallopian tubes are found on each side of the uterus, near the ovaries. These are tiny tubes – only as wide inside as a thick human hair and just 10cm long! The funnel-like ends of the fallopian tubes pick up the egg released by the ovary and carry it to the uterus. Tiny, microscopic hairs line the inside of the fallopian tubes and help move the egg along. The inside of the tube is very delicate and can very easily be damaged or blocked by infection.

The uterus

The uterus is made of muscle: it’s about the size and shape of an upside down pear, hollow, and very stretchy. This is where the baby develops if a woman becomes pregnant. The uterus can stretch to hold a baby and shrink more or less back to its pre-pregnancy size after the baby is born.
The cervix

The lower part of the uterus which connects to the vagina is called the cervix. Sperm released by the man during sex swim from the vagina through the cervix to reach an egg.

The cervix contains small glands which produce secretions called mucus. This alters in texture and amount during a woman's menstrual cycle. In her fertile phase (the time around ovulation — when an ovary releases an egg) it changes from being thick, sticky and creamy in colour to being clearer, wetter, and more stretchy — like raw egg white. These changes allow sperm to pass through the cervix and reach the egg more easily. When a woman is pregnant, the cervix becomes plugged with very thick mucus to protect the developing baby from infection.

Vagina

The vagina is a muscular tube 7–10 cm long which leads from the cervix to the vaginal opening (vulva). The vagina opens between the legs, between the urethra (the tube women pee through) at the front and the anus at the back. The vagina tilts upward and towards the small of the back. It has glands which produce lubricating secretions when women are sexually aroused to help the penis enter the vagina (penetration). Like the uterus, the vaginal walls are stretchy, allowing it to hold a tampon and stretch around a penis during sex, or a baby during delivery.

The menstrual cycle

The menstrual cycle is the process during which an egg develops and is released from the ovaries and the lining of the uterus prepares for a possible pregnancy. If a woman does not become pregnant, the lining of the uterus is shed, as her period.
These events are caused by **hormones**—chemical messengers which travel around the body in the bloodstream.

**How long does the cycle take?**
- The number of days in the menstrual cycle is calculated from the first day of the period to the day before the start of the next period.
- The average length of the menstrual cycle is around 28 days, although many women have longer or shorter cycles and this is normal.

**What happens during the menstrual cycle?**
- The first day of the period is known as day 1 of the cycle. When a woman has her period, about 20 eggs start to develop in the ovary.