**The Female Body: Menstrual Cycle and Ovulation**

The menstrual cycle is regulated by hormones:

3 Phases of the menstrual Cycle: **Follicular Phase:** 1st ½, **Ovulatory Phase**, **Luteal Phase**  
  
The menstrual cycle begins with menstrual bleeding (menstruation), which marks the first day of the follicular phase. Bleeding occurs when levels of estrogen and progesterone decrease, causing the thickened lining of the uterus (endometrium) to degenerate and be shed.

The length of a woman's menstrual cycle is calculated by the number of days between one period and the next.

A cycle begins on the first day of bleeding and continues up to, but not including, the first day of the next period. The average menstrual cycle is around **28** days long. However, a cycle can range anywhere from 21 days to 35 days or more. The length of a woman's cycle may change a little from month to month. Most menstrual periods can last from 1 to 8 days, with the average being 4 to 5 days.

To understand conception, it is helpful to know about female reproductive system and the menstruation cycle. A female is born with about 400,000 eggs in their ovaries. The female body begins to ovulate during puberty. About once a month, several eggs mature, and the lining of the uterus has been building and has become thick to act as a “nest” for the egg to implant. Then an egg is released from the ovary. If it is not fertilized within 12-48 hours, it disintegrates. Approximately 2 weeks later, the thick lining of the uterus is shed, and you begin menstruating. Your next menstruation cycle then begins again.

**When Do You Ovulate:**Ovulation is the release of the matured egg from the ovary. In response to a hormonal signal, the follicle (holding the egg) bursts open and frees the egg - this is when you ovulate. Ovulation typically occurs around 14 or 15 days from the first day of the female's last menstruation cycle. Once you ovulate, the ovum (egg) travels into the fallopian tube and is receptive to fertilization by a sperm.

**"The Fertile Period":**Once you ovulate, this is the most fertile period for the female body. This is the time when conception can occur, and you are most likely to become pregnant. Since the egg has been released (i.e., you ovulated) and is available for fertilization, if a female engages in unprotected intercourse, fertilization and conception can occur. A female is most fertile during ovulation and can become pregnant from [unprotected sexual relations](http://contraception.about.com/od/contraceptionoverview/f/Purposes.htm) that took place anytime during this fertile period - basically, from the 5 days before ovulation to 1 day afterwards.

