



PATIENT'S FACT SHEET

Reproductive Aging in Women

Your reproductive system ages faster than you may realize. Some women, after completing college, settling into a career, or waiting for the right partner, find that they have problems getting pregnant due to age-related infertility. Other women are surprised when they begin developing symptoms of menopause, such as hot flashes, while they still feel young and healthy. Understanding the stages your reproductive system goes through is important in understanding these changes in your body. The chart below should help you gain a better understanding of the reproductive aging process.

	First Period			Final Period		
	Reproductive Years			Menopausal Transition		Post-menopause
Average Age	9-15	16-30	31-42	40s	Late 40s, early 50s	50s and beyond
Menstrual Cycles	Variable	Regular	Regular	>1 week variation between lengths of periods	2 or more skipped periods	None
Signs and Symptoms			Fertility progressively declining		Hot flashes, irritability, depression, and sleep disturbance	Vaginal dryness, bone loss

Reproductive Years: Your first menstrual period occurs around age 12. Your periods (cycles) may be irregular at first but should become regular over the next few years. You will need contraception if you are sexually active and don't want to become pregnant. Your fertility peaks from your late teens through your late 20s and then begins to decline. In your 30s, your chance of miscarriage begins to increase.

Menopausal Transition: Usually in your 40s, you'll begin the transition from your reproductive years to menopause. The length of your cycles will start to vary and you'll begin to skip periods. You may experience hot flashes due to decreased estrogen production by your ovaries and may have difficulty sleeping. Pregnancy is rare but not impossible, so contraception is still needed to avoid pregnancy. The average age of the final menstrual period (menopause) is age 51.

Postmenopause: After menopause, pregnancy is no longer possible and you will not need contraception. Your ovaries will produce very little estrogen, which results in vaginal dryness and bone loss. Hot flashes will intensify and then begin to subside. Hormone therapy or other treatments may be appropriate for short-term use. If you have any vaginal bleeding during this stage, you should see your doctor.

No matter where you are in the reproductive aging process, the stages outlined above should help you and your doctor discuss your needs concerning contraception, reproductive potential, and/or menopause.

The American Society for Reproductive Medicine grants permission to photocopy this fact sheet and distribute it to patients.