

PERIODS FOR PERFORMANCE

Athlete Information Sheet

Why Periods are Important?

Having a regular period is a visible sign of a female's hormonal health, and usually signifies a good energy balance. Having regular periods is a good guide to the readiness for training and performance.

A regular menstrual cycle or period is considered as having a period every 28 – 35 days - from the first day of one period, to the start of a second.

Commonly, cycles can be irregular in their first 2 years but usually become regular with time and settle into a consistent pattern.

What does it mean when periods are missed?

When women miss more than 3 periods in a row this is known as **Amenorrhoea**.

- **Primary** amenorrhoea is when periods haven't started by age 15 year
- **Secondary** amenorrhoea is when periods have started, but then they stopped.

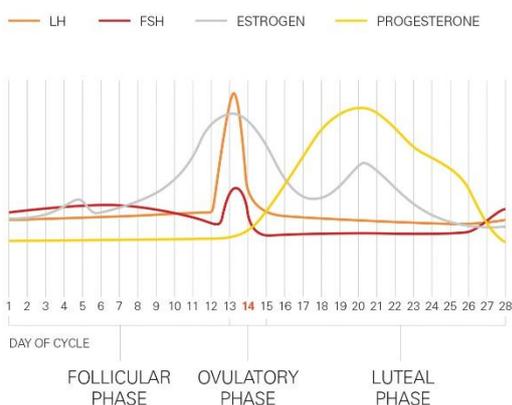
When women have only 6 – 9 periods in a year, or the length of cycles is more than 35 days, this is known as **Oligomenorrhoea**.

The most common cause of amenorrhea or oligomenorrhea in athletes is 'functional hypothalamic amenorrhoea' (FHA), which means that a woman's body isn't producing hormones as expected, and therefore periods are affected. In athletes, this usually results from not having enough energy intake (food) for the amount of exercise/training being performed (energy output).

While common, missing periods as a result of FHA is neither normal nor optimal from a health, training, recovery or performance perspective. Inadequate energy intake (from food), hormonal imbalance and the absence of periods can have negative effects on training, bone health and the risk of infection.

Other common causes of oligomenorrhoea or amenorrhoea include thyroid gland dysfunction, polycystic ovarian syndrome and pregnancy.

HORMONE LEVEL



What is Functional Hypothalamic Amenorrhea?

The hypothalamus and pituitary gland are areas of the brain that produce chemicals called hormones. Those hormones circulate in the blood and affect the way the ovaries are working and are critical to having 'normal' cycles of periods.

Stress, in any form, can change the release of hormones from the hypothalamus and pituitary gland, and cause amenorrhoea.

The most common stress in athletes that affects the production of hormones, is a lack of energy balance.

When athletes don't eat enough food (energy) to allow for exercise levels, recovery and all the other functions of the body, hormone production is reduced, and periods may cease.

Intense exercise on its own does not stop periods – if there is enough food consumed (energy-in) to meet the bodies requirements (energy-out).

What to do when periods are not regular?

If an athlete's cycle of periods (menstrual cycle) has changed, or does not fit with the pattern described above, a general practitioner (GP), Sports Doctor/Physician or Sport Medical Director should be consulted.

A Doctor will want to understand the woman's medical history, perform an examination, take some blood tests (including hormone levels) and, sometimes, perform a pelvic ultrasound scan.

Treatment will depend on the underlying cause of the change in menstrual cycle, but may involve a nutritionist, physiologist and psychologist, in addition to a medical doctor.

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