

IRREGULAR PERIODS: A HIDDEN HEALTH RISK

IN APRIL, HER VISION IS TURNING THE SPOTLIGHT ON MENSTRUATION; A SUBJECT OFTEN WHISPERED ABOUT YET CENTRAL TO WOMEN'S WELLBEING. THROUGH A FOUR-PART SERIES, WE UNPACK THE REALITIES, MYTHS AND MEDICAL TRUTHS BEHIND MENSTRUAL HEALTH, OFFERING INSIGHT AND GUIDANCE ON HOW TO NAVIGATE THESE EXPERIENCES. IN THE THIRD PART, **VIOLAH NIWAHA** EXAMINES IRREGULAR PERIODS.

A menstrual cycle is an important indicator of overall health. It is not uncommon to have irregular cycles, which is often harmless, especially during adolescence after childbirth or when approaching menopause. However, there are occasions when periods change suddenly, become persistently unpredictable or are accompanied by pain and heavy bleeding. Irregular periods can signal underlying health issues that require attention and doctors warn that dismissing irregularities can delay diagnosis and treatment of the conditions.

EXPERIENCES BEGIN WITH SILENCE

Jane Kaseeru, 24, a resident of Kalerwe in Kampala, began experiencing irregular periods in 2022. For six consecutive months, her cycles were unpredictable, extremely painful and heavy. At the time, she was a student and sought advice from schoolmates who encouraged her to fast and pray. She followed their guidance, but her condition worsened.

Within a single 28-day cycle, she lost noticeable weight and the pain became unmanageable. When she finally sought medical attention, a gynaecologist diagnosed her with


polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), a hormonal condition affecting women of reproductive age.

For Marie, whose name has been

withheld to protect her privacy, irregular periods had always been part of her life. When her periods began coming late, skipping months

or returning heavily and abruptly, she assumed it was normal.

"Sometimes I would go two months without a period, then suddenly deal



A regular menstrual cycle lasts between 21 and 35 days, measured from the first day of bleeding to the next. It is characterised by consistent, predictable timing varying by only a few days

with a heavy and uncomfortable one. I told myself that was just how my body worked," she says.

Over time, the pain intensified, disrupting her studies and daily life. She relied on painkillers and home remedies, delaying medical care in the hope that things would improve on their own. "I could no longer hide it or manage quietly."

Their experiences reflect a common pattern where irregular cycles are dismissed until symptoms become unbearable.

A NORMAL MENSTRUAL CYCLE

A regular menstrual cycle typically lasts between 21 and 35 days, measured from the first day of bleeding to the next.

"It is characterised by consistent, predictable timing varying by only a few days, which indicates hormonal balance," explains Dr Frank Kyeyune, a gynaecologist at Case Hospital, Kampala. A normal period usually lasts between three and seven days. Any persistent deviation from this pattern, excluding pregnancy, is considered irregular.

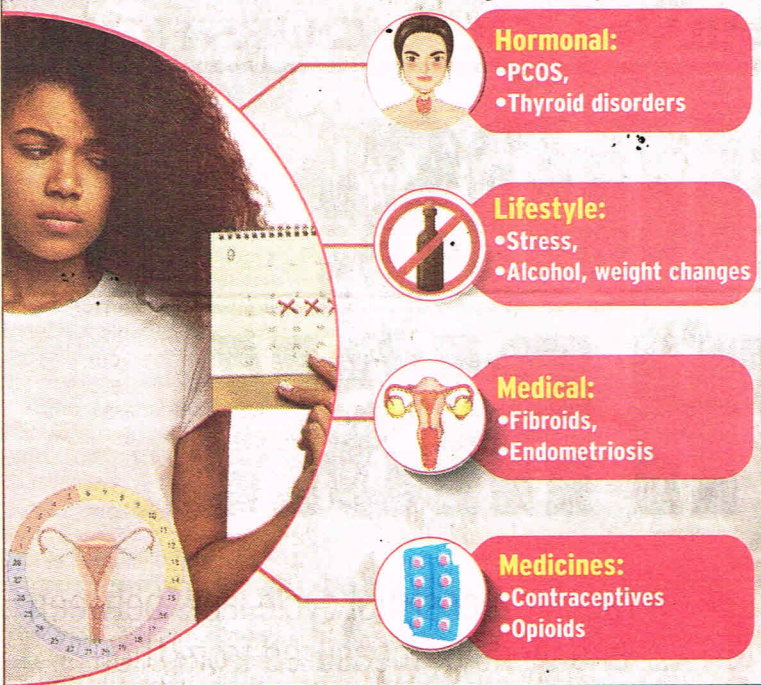
Despite this, many women ignore changes because irregular cycles do not always bring immediate pain or discomfort.

"If a period delays, comes earlier than expected or is missed, most people simply move on, yet they need to pay attention and deal with the root cause," Dr Kyeyune says.

LIFESTYLE FACTORS CAN INFLUENCE MENSTRUAL PATTERNS

GRAPHIC BY LILLIA BABIRYE

Common causes of irregular periods



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He advises women to take even small changes seriously. "Your menstrual cycle is an important sign of your overall health. Track it, understand your pattern and don't ignore consistent changes."

WHY PERIODS BECOME IRREGULAR

Irregular periods are most commonly caused by hormonal imbalances. Variations in the production of oestrogen, progesterone, luteinising hormone and follicle-stimulating hormone affect the timing, duration and flow of menstruation.

One factor that affects hormones is the use of contraceptives.

These are hormonal birth control (like pills, injections, or intrauterine devices) that work by introducing synthetic hormones that thin the uterine lining and often stop ovulation.

During the first few months of use, your body must adjust to these new levels, which frequently causes spotting or "breakthrough bleeding" between periods.

Certain medical conditions may also interfere with normal cycles. These include PCOS, fibroids, endometriosis and thyroid disorders. Dr Kyeyune explains that disorders like PCOS and endometriosis often run in families. In PCOS, genetic variations can cause the ovaries to produce too many androgens (male-type hormones), which prevents regular ovulation.

The thyroid hormone, Dr Kyeyune explains, plays a vital role in menstruation and puberty. Too much or too little thyroid hormone can disrupt cycles.

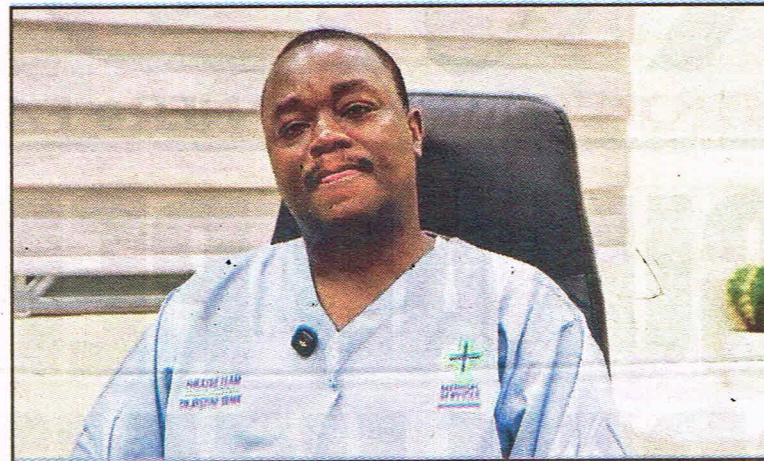
Elevated thyroid stimulating hormone is often associated with light or scanty periods, while low thyroxine levels can cause heavy and

prolonged bleeding.

Lifestyle factors further influence menstrual patterns. Stress triggers the release of cortisol, also known as the 'stress hormone', which interferes with the hypothalamus in the brain, the centre responsible for regulating the menstrual cycle. Chronic stress may delay or prevent ovulation, resulting in missed or late periods.

Certain drugs such as opioids suppress the hormones required for ovulation, sometimes leading to complete absence of periods (amenorrhoea), because the brain fails to trigger the ovaries to release an egg, adds Dr Kyeyune.

Alcohol abuse alters hormone levels and affects how the liver processes excess hormones, contributing to heavier or unpredictable bleeding. Dr Kyeyune explains that chronic or heavy drinking can increase



Dr Frank Kyeyune, a gynaecologist at Case Hospital, Kampala

levels of oestrogen and testosterone, which disrupts the natural hormonal fluctuations necessary for regular cycles. Alcohol also affects the liver's ability to process and clear excess hormones from your system, further contributing to irregularity and heavier bleeding.

Dr Kirunda Kyasuba Quinne Alexandria from Lira University Hospital says, "For many girls and women, a missed period is often blamed on pressure or change in routine. This can cause irregular, missed or absent periods (amenorrhoea), as well as heavier, lighter, or more painful periods (dysmenorrhoea)."

HOW COMMON IS THE PROBLEM?

Studies indicate a high prevalence of menstrual disorders among young women in Uganda. One study found that 97.8% of Makerere University medical students reported some form of menstrual dysfunction. Another study conducted at Mbarara University of Science and Technology reported a prevalence of 85.6% among students aged 14 to 24.

Many women ignore irregular periods for several reasons, "Some lack awareness and think the

changes are normal. Others cannot easily afford medical care, so they delay seeking help. Some try to treat themselves with advice from friends or over-the-counter medicines," Dr Kirunda says.

Cultural silence around menstrual health also makes many women feel shy or uncomfortable discussing such issues. In addition, fear of discovering a serious problem makes some women avoid going to the hospital.

DEAL WITH IRREGULAR PERIODS

Medical experts advise that one should seek care immediately they experience irregular periods and are not pregnant for the root cause to be diagnosed and treatment provided.

If left untreated, the condition has several effects.

Irregular periods can lead to abnormal uterine bleeding, defined as bleeding outside a normal cycle or lasting longer than seven days.

This includes heavy menstrual bleeding such as soaking through pads (a pad takes in maximum 60ml of blood) or tampons every hour for consecutive hours, passing large clots or bleeding lasting longer than seven days.

Dr Kirunda explains that abnormal bleeding is a health concern because "You are losing blood, at a rate faster than it takes to replace it. This puts one at a risk of anaemia, especially when the flow is heavy or prolonged. Other related health concerns include pelvic inflammatory disease and endometriosis.

One's ability to get pregnant is also affected by some of the causes of irregular bleeding.

"That is when they begin to realise that ovulation may have been affected for a long time," Dr Kirunda explains.

WHEN TO SEEK MEDICAL ATTENTION

For women in their late 30s or 40s, cycles often become shorter or skip months, explains Dr Rebecca Atukunda, at Mildmay Hospital. This is usually peri-menopause. Additionally, sometimes the first few periods after the very first period/onset of periods can be irregular. However, for most menopausal women, in the 20s to 40s, you

MYTHS THAT DELAY CARE

Misconceptions prevent women from seeking timely help as follows:

Myth: Irregular cycles are just a sign of stress.

Fact: While stress is a significant factor, irregular cycles can also signal underlying conditions like PCOS, fibroids, or thyroid dysfunction.

Myth: Contraceptive pills 'fix' irregular periods.

Fact: Contraceptive pills provide a withdrawal bleed that mimics a period, but it often masks the underlying hormonal issue rather than curing it.

Myth: You can't get pregnant if your cycle is irregular.

Fact: This is false. You can still ovulate at unpredictable times, meaning pregnancy is possible. It is important to use protection if you are not trying to conceive, Dr Kirunda Kyasuba Quinne Alexandria explains.

should seek urgent medical attention for the following:

The "super soaker" rule: You soak through a pad or tampon every hour for several hours.

Post-menopausal bleeding: Any bleeding after you have gone 12 months without a period.

Severe pain: Pelvic pain that isn't managed by over-the-counter meds.

Very frequent cycles: Periods that occur more often than every 21 days.

Extremely long cycles: No period for more than 90 days (if not pregnant).

She advises that help can be sought from the following:

● **Physician/doctor:** This should always be a starting point for initial blood work (screening and treatment for anaemia thyroid, basic hormones).

● **Gynaecologist:** For pelvic exams and ultrasounds to check for structural issues like fibroids or cysts.

● **Reproductive endocrinologist:** This is on referral after being diagnosed with a hormonal disorder like PCOS or if you are struggling with fertility.

● **Endocrinologist:** If the issue is suspected to be related to your thyroid or insulin or other hormonal condition.

FINDING HEALING

Treatment depends on the cause. Noteworthy is that most causes of irregular periods are treatable or manageable with early medical care.

For hormonal imbalances, treatment may include birth control pills, progesterone therapy or other hormone-regulating medication.

For lifestyle-related irregularities, doctors recommend weight management, improved diet, regular exercise, stress reduction, adequate sleep and limiting alcohol intake.

Adopt lifestyle changes to cope

Dr Troy Ongom from Wynestone Hospital in Bulenga recommends the adoption of the following lifestyle changes to reduce the risk of irregular menstrual health;

● **Eat food rich in proteins and iron to help in the repair and regeneration of blood cells. Such foods include beans, ground-nuts, sim sim, soy beans, peas, lentils, liver, beef, goat meat, fish, eggs as well as vegetables such as nakati, dodo, sukuma wiki and pumpkin leaves. Seek the advice of a nutritionist on the best combinations, frequency and quantity of the foods to consume for the best results.**

● **Manage stress, for example, through taking warm baths to help relax your body and muscles. In cases of extreme stress, it is advisable to talk with a health care provider for support to cope as well as have social support through maintaining connections that help regulate stress and prevent isolation.**

● **Drink at least two litres of water in a day to keep your body hydrated.**

● **Exercises like walking, swimming and cycling for at least 30 minutes every five days. Exercise can also include strength training to build muscles.**

● **Have adequate sleep, which should be at least seven hours per night. Maintain sleep hygiene, that is, keep your room cool (18°C), dark and quiet to improve the quality of your sleep.**