

## Female Athlete Education.

# THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE : TIME TO TALK

## Why talk?



Speaking to someone about your menstrual cycle helps you to **get the appropriate support you might need**. For example, if you're experiencing:

- Period pain and other symptoms
- Heavy menstrual bleeding
- Absent or irregular periods

Additionally, maintaining an open dialogue with those supporting you (e.g., a coach) might help you to **keep being active and/or optimise your performance and training**, particularly if you're struggling to train/compete at certain points in your cycle.

**Reminder: You don't always have to talk to someone about your menstrual cycle. It is entirely up to you how much information you want to share with others around you.**

If you're wondering who you can speak to, here are some examples...

### 1

## A parent/guardian

A parent/guardian can be a **great place to start** talking about your menstrual cycle. They might also help you approach others (e.g., doctor/ coach).



## A coach

### 2

Your menstrual cycle might be affecting your ability to keep being active, perform in competition and/or train optimally. Speaking to your **coach, or others supporting you** (e.g., S&C coach, female liaison officer/female mentor) might help you.

### 3

## Friends/ teammates

Another great place to start having open conversations about your menstrual cycle. But, it's important to remember that **your experience of your menstrual cycle might not be the same as your friends or teammates** and others (e.g., doctor/ coach) might be able to help support you better.



### 4

## Doctor/ medical practitioner



It's important to **seek medical advice** if you're struggling with your menstrual cycle and/or notice a change in what's 'normal' for you. They can provide you with the support you need.

## Someone you trust

### 6

Ultimately, the most important point is to find **someone you can trust** to have this conversation.



## Female liaison officer

### 5

Your sports club/ organisation might have a **specific person (e.g., a female liaison officer/female mentor)** that you can speak to about your menstrual cycle. Ask around to find out if you have one!



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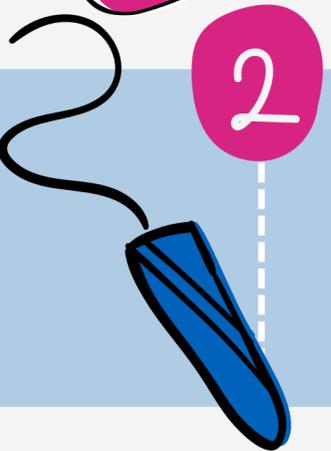
# MANAGING MY PERIOD: THE OPTIONS

When it comes to managing your period and choosing period products, there are **many different options available**. The type of product(s) you use will vary depending on personal preference, blood flow, and maybe even the sport/activity you do. Below is a short **summary of the different types of period products available, including how they work.**



## Pads

Pads are probably the first-ever period product you will use and they are one of the easiest period products out there! Pads are made of absorbent material that you simply stick to the inside of your underwear to absorb your period blood as it comes out of the vagina. You can also buy reusable cloth pads that work in a similar way.



## Tampons

Tampons are another very common period product. These are cylindrical and are made of compacted, soft, cotton (or other fibres) material. A tampon has to be inserted into your vagina where it sits and absorbs period blood before it comes out of your vagina. A string attached to the bottom of the tampon is used to remove the tampon.



## Period knickers

Period knickers are new to the period product scene but they are very easy and simple to use. They are just like your regular underwear except they contain extra, absorbent layers of fabric which allows them to absorb menstrual blood. They can be used on their own or as a backup for tampons and menstrual cups. They are reusable and can last several years.



## Menstrual cup

Menstrual cups are small, egg-shaped cups made from flexible materials, like medical grade silicone that you insert into the vagina. They work like tampons in that they sit inside of the body. But, rather than absorbing blood, cups collect the blood to be disposed down the toilet once you've removed your cup. They are reusable and can last up to 10 years!



### QUICK TIPS

Periods sometimes arrive unexpected. To avoid not having period products when you need them (especially when you're playing sport) create a period product kit with all your favourite products in which you can take with you wherever you go!



## Female Athlete Education.

# HORMONAL CONTRACEPTION: THE BASICS

## What are hormonal contraceptives?

Hormonal contraceptives are medications or devices containing synthetic oestrogen and/or progesterone to **prevent an unplanned pregnancy**.

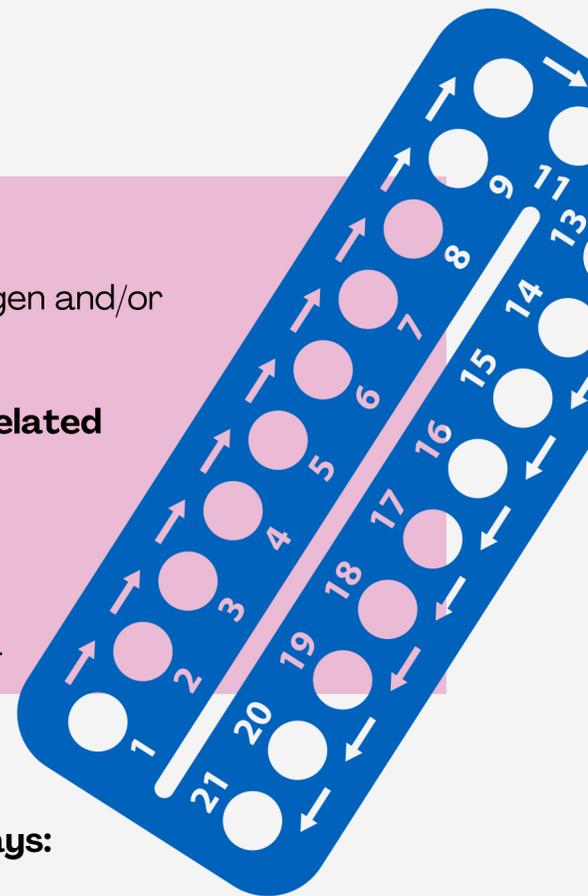


They are commonly used by female athletes to **manage menstrual cycle-related symptoms** (e.g., abdominal cramps)\*



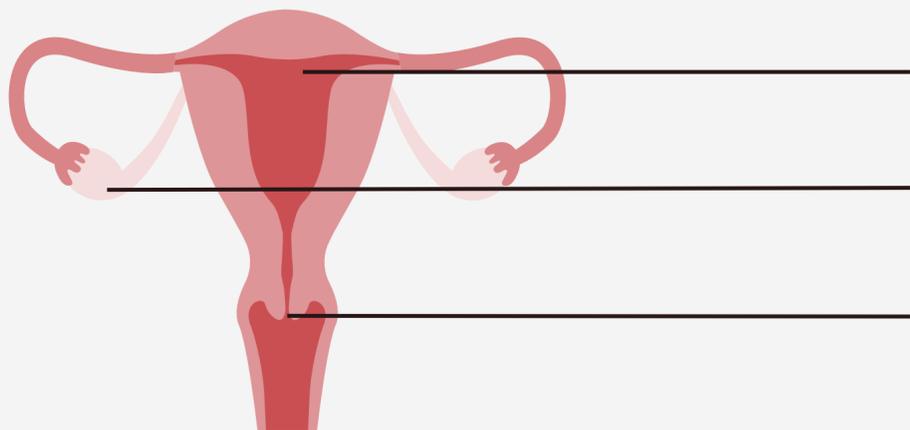
Sometimes, female athletes use hormonal contraceptives to **modify bleeding** (e.g., to avoid bleeding during important competitions etc.)\*

\*Reminder: Please seek medical guidance from a doctor/GP before deciding to use hormonal contraceptives.



## How do hormonal contraceptives work?

Generally, hormonal contraceptives can prevent pregnancy in **three different ways**:



### Thin uterine lining:

Creates an unfriendly environment for a fertilised egg to implant and develop.

### Prevent ovulation:

Prevents ovary from releasing an egg each cycle.

### Thicken cervical mucus:

Makes it difficult for sperm to pass through the cervix.

Hormonal contraceptives **change your natural menstrual cycle** depending on the type. For example, you may not experience the typical rise and fall of natural oestrogen and progesterone observed in a menstrual cycle!

There are **various types of hormonal contraceptives** such as the combined pill, intrauterine system, and the implant (and much more), which deliver hormones in different ways (e.g., orally, through the skin or muscle etc.) For more information on the different types, see 'Hormonal Contraception: The Different Types'.

The bleed you may experience on hormonal contraceptives is not your period, it is known as a **withdrawal bleed**.

## Where to get advice on hormonal contraceptives?

It is essential to consult with a **healthcare professional** regarding hormonal contraceptive options to help you make informed decisions that prioritise your health and safety. If you experience any **unwanted side effects**, don't hesitate to contact your healthcare professional to explore alternative options. These may include your GP, gynaecologist, pharmacist, or family planning clinic.

Useful links (Ireland): <https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/> and <https://www.mycontraception.ie/>



## Female Athlete Education.

# BREAST HEALTH: SPORTS BRA FIT



### Breast health basics:

The female breast is a unique structure and is composed of three major components: **fibrous (connective)**, **glandular (mammary)**, and **adipose (fat) tissue**.

**Cooper's ligaments** are one of the **connective tissues** in the breasts, which are often described as the main supporting structure for the breast. But, these only offer **limited support** and most of the support is **provided instead by the skin** which overlays the breast

As the breast has limited support, even **small movements result in breast movement**, highlighting **the need for some level of external support**. This need for external support is **increased during sport and exercise!**

### Approximately 85% of women/girls are wearing a poor-fitting sports bra!

This might be impacting both **participation** in sport and exercise, as well as **performance**. As such, it's important to be aware of the **different types of sports bras available** and how we can ensure **correct fit**.

### Sports bra types:

There are **three** distinct styles:

- 1) Encapsulation** - work by lifting and supporting each breast separately (suited for larger-breasted women/girls e.g., >D cup).
- 2) Compression** - work by compressing the breast tissue to the chest wall (suited for smaller-breasted women/girls e.g., <D cup).
- 3) Combination** - incorporate both compressive and encapsulating features.



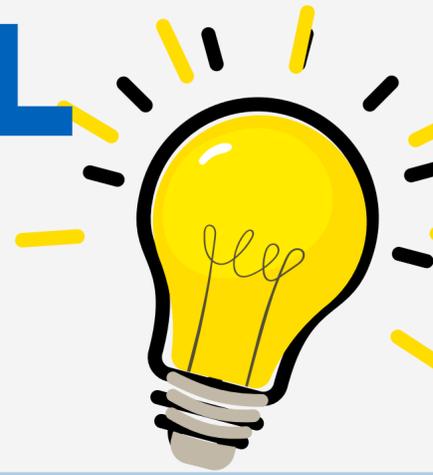
### Five steps we can follow to ensure we get the best fit...

- 1 Underband:** The band should fit firmly around the chest. It shouldn't slide around with movement, but it shouldn't be too tight to be uncomfortable, affect breathing or make flesh bulge over the band. 
- 2 Cup:** The breasts should be enclosed within the cups, with no bulging or gaping at the top or sides. If the material puckers the cup size is too big. 
- 3 Straps:** The straps should be adjusted to comfortably give support without being too tight or loose. The main support should come from a firm band not tight straps. 
- 4 Front:** The front of the bra should sit flat against the body and not gape away from the chest - the closer that is to the body, the better the fit. 
- 5 Underwire:** Not all sports bras have this, but if it does it should follow the natural crease of the breast. 



## Female Athlete Education.

# THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE : TOP TIPS FOR COACHES



## How can I optimise the support I provide to the female athletes I work with?

Coaches, and all other performance staff have additional factors to consider when working with female athletes. For example, **one unique consideration specific for sportswomen is the menstrual cycle** which could influence an athletes health, participation, and performance/training in sport.

**Reminder:** Not every athlete might want to talk discuss/share their menstrual cycle information with you and that's ok, but it's important to still create spaces where this can be talked about, if wanted.



### Communicate

It's important to be able to communicate with your athlete openly and honestly about the menstrual cycle. It might feel awkward at first, but **it's a topic not only relevant to their performance, but also their health/participation.** To get the conversation started try using posters in shared spaces educating about this topic - this will show athletes that you're receptive to this information.



### Environment



We need to **create sporting environments that are designed for female athletes.** This could include things such as, ensuring that period products/ disposables are available in toilets, having conversations surrounding training kits (e.g., dark shorts instead of white shorts), and providing education surrounding female health.

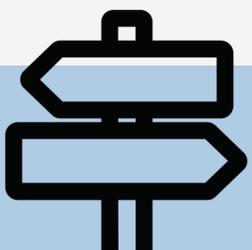


### Support



For some female athletes, participation as well as performance and/or training might be affected (both positively and negatively) by their menstrual cycle. As a result you might have to **provide support to minimise any issues and maximise any positives.** Reminder: everyone's experience of their menstrual cycle will likely be different so you'll need to **individualise support.**

### Signpost



As a coach you're **not expected to have all the answers, but you should be able to signpost/direct** your athlete to further help (if it's required). This might be in the form of pointing them in the direction of medical support through a doctor/GP or educational support, such as the likes of our SHE Female Athlete Education Resources etc.

