

Women's Health Centre

One-Stop Gynaecology Clinic
London W1G 9QP
(020) 3368 8379

The Harley Street Clinic

35 Weymouth Street,
London W1G 8BJ,
(020) 3368 8379

INTERMENSTRUAL BLEEDING INFORMATION LEAFLET

What IS Intermenstrual Bleeding?

The term Intermenstrual Bleeding (IMB) describes bleeding or spotting that occurs between periods. Usually, menstrual cycles last 28 days, but they can last anywhere between 21-35 days. It is not normal to experience bleeding in between periods, but it is very common; most women will experience this type of bleeding at some point in their lives.

IMB is not the same as 'irregular' periods which is when the period itself comes at infrequent or unpredictable times (closer than 21 days or further apart than 35 days).

What Are The Reasons For Intermenstrual Bleeding?

IMB is quite common, and it can be caused by a variety of factors - some are harmless, but others can have serious consequences.

IMB can be caused by the following factors:

Hormonal

Women who have just started their periods or who are close to menopause (when your periods stop, usually around 51) may experience irregular menstrual cycles, or spot between cycles, because their female hormones (oestrogen and progesterone) aren't following a regular pattern. You should, however, seek advice if you are close to menopause and do not assume that your IMB is due to simple aging.

Mid-Cycle Bleeding With Ovulation

Women have spotting during their cycle when they ovulate (release an egg) in the middle of their cycle. Generally, this does not require treatment as long as it only occurs about two weeks before your period. However, if it occurs repeatedly, you should still have a checkup to rule out other causes.

Pregnancy

A pregnancy-related problem, such as miscarriage or ectopic pregnancy (the pregnancy growing in the tube instead of the womb), may appear as IMB to you if you don't know you are pregnant.

Hormone Therapy (HRT) After Menopause

The use of hormone therapy (HRT) after menopause may cause irregular bleeding, a common and harmless complication. A few months after taking HRT, it usually settles down.

Some Types Of Contraception

It is possible to experience intermenstrual bleeding with the use of oral contraceptives such as the pill, the mini-pill, or the contraceptive ring. The term breakthrough bleeding (BTB) is used to describe IMB on contraception. Usually, this type of bleeding occurs for the first three months after starting the pill, but then settles down. Additionally, it can occur if you miss a pill or have diarrhoea or vomiting while taking it. Remember that if you have missed a pill, or have vomiting or diarrhoea, you may not be protected from falling pregnant so extra contraception, like a condom, is required. Injectable contraceptives like Depot Provera or implants like Implanon may cause irregular bleeding. This usually settles after 3-6 months. IUCDs containing hormones (progesterone) like Mirena are more likely to cause BTB. Breakthrough bleeding usually stops about six months after an IUCD contains progesterone has been fitted.

Infections

Chlamydia or Gonorrhoea are sexually transmitted infections that can cause intermenstrual bleeding. These infections may also cause other symptoms like abnormal or increased vaginal discharge, tummy pain, stinging when passing urine, fevers, and bleeding after sex (called post-coital bleeding).

Polyps

These are small areas of thickening of the endometrium (lining of the uterus) or cervix (neck of the womb). They are usually benign (harmless, not cancerous).

Fibroids

These are benign muscle growths of the uterus or cervix. It is possible for them to occasionally cause IMB, depending on their location.

Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS)

Women with polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) who develop IMB should seek medical advice since women with PCOS are more likely to develop endometrial thickening (hyperplasia).

Endometriosis

Occasionally causes spotting which starts a few days before your period (this is known as premenstrual spotting).

Medicines

Sometimes medicines, like Warfarin, which thins your blood, may cause bleeding in between your periods.

A Thickening Of The Endometrium (Also Known As Hyperplasia)

This is not a cancer, but if left untreated it may become one.

Cancer Of The Endometrium

This is a very rare reason for intermenstrual bleeding.

Cancer of the cervix - this is a very rare reason for intermenstrual bleeding.

IF IMB IS COMMON, WHEN SHOULD I SEE MY DOCTOR ABOUT IT?

Even with the above list of possible causes, if IMB happens once or twice, it is reasonable to wait and see if it settles. You should seek advice, however, in the following situations:

- Whenever bleeding occurs more than a few times a month or for an extended period of time.
- A heavy bleed or feeling unwell, in particular feeling dizzy or sick.
- In addition to bleeding, you might have other symptoms like pain, fever, or unusual vaginal discharge.
- If you are 45 years or older.
- If you also have bleeding after sex - this is called post-coital bleeding.
- If there is any possibility you could be pregnant, you should do a pregnancy test and see your doctor straight away.

How Will We Investigate To Find The Cause Of My Bleeding?

We will ask you questions about your health, period, medicine you are taking, and whether you are pregnant. Additionally, we will check your abdomen (tummy), do an internal examination, and examine your cervix with a speculum. It's the same as a pap smear.

Our tests may include any of the following depending on what we suspect is causing your bleeding:

- Samples are taken from the vagina and cervix to look for STIs.
- A pregnancy test.
- A Pap smear.
- An ultrasound may be done through the tummy wall or transvaginal (TVS).

In a TVS, a narrow, hand-held transducer (also called a probe or wand) is inserted into the vagina. As a result of this method, the uterus (womb), cervix, and ovaries can be examined very closely, resulting in very clear images. Even though a TVS sounds uncomfortable, most women find it to be more comfortable than a scan done through the tummy wall, which requires a full bladder

In Case Of Bleeding, What Treatment Should I Seek?

Your IMB can be treated differently based on the reason and what you would like to do about the bleeding.

You may need to try a different pill option if the bleeding is caused by your contraceptive or menopausal hormone therapy. You may not need to make any changes if the bleeding does not bother you.

Antibiotics will be prescribed if an infection is diagnosed. To prevent recurrence of STIs, your partner must also be treated. Otherwise, you may get infected again. However, if the infection is simply candida ('thrush'), just treating you is sufficient.

A hysteroscopy, which examines the womb for a cause for bleeding, or even a laparoscopy which examines the tummy for endometriosis may be required if a polyp, fibroid, or thickened endometrium has been found.

You will need a colposcopy if your Pap smear is abnormal. It is a simple test to examine your cervix closely and determine whether treatment is necessary.

We may need further rest if we suspect cancer is causing your bleeding.

Let us know if you experience bleeding in between periods so that we can assure you that the bleeding isn't caused by infection or cancer. In most cases, IMB occurs because of a non-serious cause and can be treated fairly easily.



Mr. Farshad Tahmasebi
Consultant Obstetrician & Gynaecologist

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