

# Working with **your** Menstrual Cycle



**01**

# Athletics Ireland

## Conversation Series

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# Working with **your** Menstrual Cycle

## Welcome Note

This is the first event in our Athletics Ireland conversation series. First and foremost we want to thank all the athletes, coaches, parents and volunteers for turning up and committing to changing the narrative around girls and women in sport. We have reached a tipping point, as women's health and physiology focusing particularly on menstrual health becomes a major part of the conversation, reflecting the important role it plays in women's health and performance.



**Orna Murray,**  
*Your Health Psychology*  
**Researcher & Facilitator**

I have a Master's in Health Psychology from NUIG and an Honors Degree in Applied Psychology from UCC. I have both professional and personal experience working with elite athletes, having had the opportunity to work as part of an elite sports science team, while also representing Ireland internationally for both distance running and squash. Passionate about sports and women's health I am working towards ensuring the next generation has the tools and the support they need to reach their athletic and personal potential.

We want to offer support so that they understand their bodies and are able to work with them rather than against them. We hope to create a movement where girls from all backgrounds want to get active and stay active for life.



**Grace Lynch,**  
*Athlete Development Manager, Athletics Ireland*  
**Co-Facilitator**

As a member of the Irish athletics community from the age six, athletics has been an integral part of my life. Athletics has helped me to grow as a person, discover my passion and connect to others with similar interests and drive in life. Athletics can pose many challenges and while these challenges provide growth and progression through learning, it has highlighted to me the importance of having support in specific areas which can provide help in navigating some of the obstacles we encounter. Orna and I shared a vision and so the Athletics Ireland conversation series was born. It is our belief that these workshops focus on four very important areas which resonate with so many others. Through Orna's expertise and the input from our community, we hope to provide an experience that not only sheds light on these topics but helps to begin a community of practice within the Irish athletics scene. It is our hope that this community will continue to grow and help to support the current and future generations of Irish athletics members.

## Our Perspectives and How we Think About the Menstrual Cycle

Our perspective is influenced by everything around us, from the people in our community, to the environment we live in, to the language we use. Most of these interactions happen without us noticing the nuanced impact they can have in shaping our outlooks and opinions. When it comes to women in sports we can readily see how much the landscape has changed even over the past five years. In recent years we have seen brilliant research and campaigns shape and advance our knowledge of female physiology and exercise. The challenge now is to implement the best practices that have emerged at all levels of sports and continue having these new conversations.

### Word Association Game

Before and after the workshop we asked participants to write the first word that came to mind when we said 'period', the examples below highlight the subconscious beliefs we have absorbed from the media, cultural norms and our communities. It also shows the power of education and creating safe spaces to learn.

Before	After
<p><b>Pain</b></p> <p><b>Bleeding</b></p> <p><b>Blood</b></p> <p><b>Uncomfortable</b></p> <p><b>Red</b></p> <p><b>Monthly</b></p> <p><b>Regular</b></p> <p><b>Women</b></p>	<p><b>Embrace</b></p> <p><b>Train</b></p> <p><b>Healthy</b></p> <p><b>PB</b></p> <p><b>seasons</b></p> <p><b>Normal</b></p> <p><b>Positive</b></p>

# Women in Sport

The women in sport movement goes beyond the track, pitch or pool. The concept goes deeper than coverage rights and match-day hype. It is an understanding that nothing is perfect and change is always possible. There has been a movement to ensure equitable access to sport and exercise across all levels and branches of women's sports, ranging from Ireland's national women's teams securing professional status to supporting young women joining their local athletics club, and everything else in between.

## Main Topics & Psychological Theory

### The Menstrual Cycle: A New Advantage?

Traditionally menstrual cycles, periods and female physiology have been seen as separate from sports and performance, a thing to be managed at best and completely ignored at worst. Recent research has shown us that having a menstrual cycle is an important indicator of health and an untapped training metric. Working with their menstrual cycle can improve an athlete's understanding of their own physiology and therefore performances. Capitalising on times during the month or cycle when motivation, energy and mood are higher (*around ovulation*) and supporting those times when the body is working a little harder and motivation might dip (*often during the premenstrual phase*) can lead to increased gains for the athlete.

### Back to Basics

Everyone's menstrual cycle is different, but there are some common characteristics.

- Most girls get their first period between 9 – 15 years old.
- A cycle can occur every 21 to 35 days.
- Periods tend to last between 2 to 7 days.
- The menstrual cycle might be regular (*about the same length every month*), or somewhat irregular, and your period might be light or heavy, long or short, and still be considered "normal".

- At first, it's common to have irregular periods, for example to have a period and then not another for a few months. Cycles tend to shorten and become more regular as a person ages.

*\* If your menstrual cycle is very irregular, painful, or maybe you haven't had a period in some time be sure to talk to a parent and medical professional.*

### For women, teenagers and female athletes

#### Tracking Your Cycle

Tracking your cycle is one of the best ways to learn about your body and your own unique menstrual cycle.

#### How do I track it?

1. You can use a calendar or an app on your phone.
2. You start by inputting the first day of your period and then the last day of bleeding.
3. You can track if it was heavy or light
4. Note how you felt, your mood and your energy levels.
5. Track the good things too! Too often we forget to track when we have a great day, feel confident and happy in our skin – this is important information.
6. Track anything else that feels important to you.

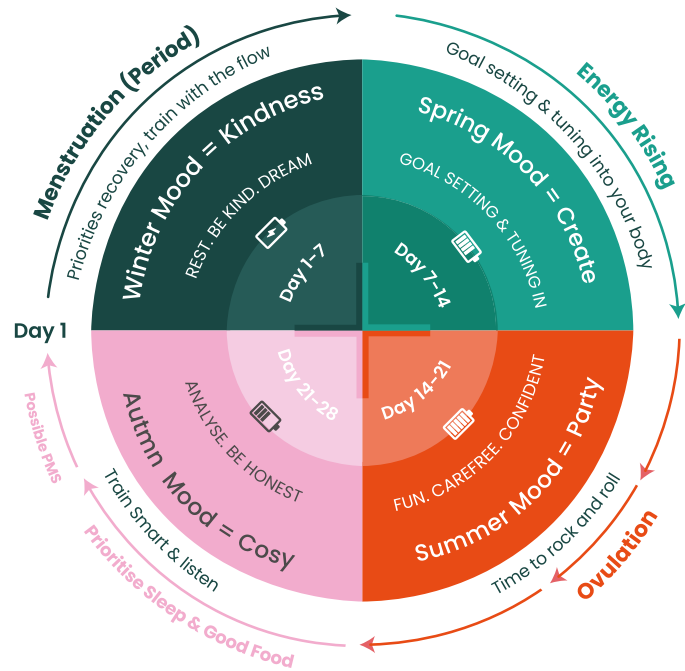
#### **NB.**

You are not going to learn to work with your periods in a day, or a week. It takes time, so be patient and kind to yourself.

## The Four Seasons

The four seasons are a great metaphor for understanding the cyclical nature of the menstrual cycle and how this might influence your training.

Remember your cycle may look different to what's outlined here. It's all about learning about your own cycle and your own 'norm'.



**You are always you!** You can **PB, perform** or **ace your exams** on *any day of your cycle*.

Women have **gone to the moon, come first in the olympics** and **won nobel peace prizes** on *their period*.

### Winter (day 1-7); Early Follicular

Your inner winter usually begins on the first day of your period or a day or two before. This is a great time to recharge your batteries. When you take the time to rest and recharge during menstruation it can have lasting benefits for the rest of the month. It's a great reason to prioritise chilling out and recovering. You can still do everything you want and need to do, but taking things a little easier can be a great call.

### Spring (day 7-14); Late Follicular

Spring sees a steady increase in oestrogen, or as I like to call it the 'Beyoncé hormone'. Most girls start to feel their energy rising and generally feel more outgoing and positive. This is a great time to lean into your training while listening to your body.

### Summer (day 14- 21); Mid Luteal

Summer is the season when you may feel the most confident and sociable. This is the amazing part of the menstrual cycle that does not get enough credit! You might have lots of energy, motivation and training can feel easier. This is a great time for giving it your all in sessions and making some new friends at training.

### Autumn (day 21 - 28); Late Luteal

After the high energy of the previous two seasons, Autumn is the perfect time to come back to yourself. Autumn represents a change in energy and motivation levels, it usually happens anywhere from a few days to a week or two before the beginning of your period. It's a great time to maybe spend some time on your own, and it can be useful to lengthen and slow down your warm-up as your body needs more time to warm up and get going. Now is also a great time for decision-making as it's easier to tune into yourself and what you want.

## Cycle Syncing

There isn't a perfect training, recovery, or performance cycle syncing programme that can be developed to fit everyone. Our bodies are constantly changing, and different environments, seasons and social factors are constantly impacting our bodies and how we feel. Developing an understanding of your body's own unique rhythm and training with that in mind will compliment what your body needs.

### **N.B**

*The menstrual cycle is just one factor that can impact your training and performance. Stress levels, nutrition, weather, immune system, sleep and recovery all influence how we're feeling.*

## Periods & Performance Checklist

If you feel a little off balance, looking at your lifestyle is a great place to start with finding out why. The menstrual cycle is a great indicator of health and well-being.



### **Sleep**

Have an exam, race, party or your period coming up? Getting a good night's sleep will set you and your body up for success. If you can, taking a short nap during the day can boost your energy levels.



### **Nutrition**

Eating regular balanced meals keeps your brain and body fueled, this is especially important around the time of your period. Stay away from caffeine and sugary drinks around the time of your period if you can!



### **Water**

Your body is about 60% water, so it's important to stay hydrated to function properly.



### **Fun/stress**

Sometimes life can seem like a lot and you may feel overwhelmed. Make sure you make the time to take a break and do something you enjoy even if it's only for 10 minutes.



### **Productivity & recovery**

The same way a car can't run without petrol, you can't expect to keep going without rest. Taking some time to rest and unwind will actually make you more productive.



### **1% rule**

Let's say you are keen to make some changes in your life but aren't exactly sure where to start, rather than making big commitments that may not last, you can work on 1% of the change you want to see. You can build on these gradually and over time you will see improvements.

## Period Tips

- **Keep menstrual products in your bag** just in case your period comes unexpectedly – which it probably will at some point!
- **Keeping a spare plastic zip-lock bag or a *FAB little bag*** (*specially designed period product disposal bags*) is handy, just in case there are no bins. Pop your used product into the bag till you can dispose of it appropriately.
- If your period comes unannounced, **don't be afraid to ask** a friend, teacher or coach for a pad or tampon – every single girl has been caught unexpectedly at one point or another.
- Lots of girls start using pads, as they find them the easiest to use, others prefer tampons. Tampons can be a little trickier to use – they should never feel uncomfortable or sore. We highly recommend looking up some YouTube videos if you are unsure.
- Leaking is surprisingly common, it happens to everyone at some point. Having a spare change of underwear, training shorts, tracksuit or school bottoms can be a good idea in case you have a leak.

## Reflection points

- What was your relationship like with the menstrual cycle before the workshop?
- What is it like now?
- What one thing could you do in your school/club/community to bring this conversation more into the mainstream?



**Notes:**

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