

- Menstruation

## The four seasons of your period explained

An expert explains what each season means for you, from luteal and follicular, to ovulation and menstruation

The Courier-Mail · 5 Jul 2024 · ASHLEY LOWE

When we think of our menstrual cycle, often our thoughts turn directly to our periods. And for many of us, aside from popping a few painkillers during the few days we bleed each month and simply trying to get on with it, we're guilty of not giving our cycle much thought.



But truth be told, our menstrual cycle is exactly as its name suggests – a cycle – and beyond the bleed, considering how each phase contributes to our overall wellbeing can provide us with the tools to not only survive our period, but thrive all month long.

While you may have heard of the different phases of the menstrual cycle – menstruation, follicular, ovulation and luteal – these words can still feel quite nebulous.

But a concept that's been rising in popularity of late is the idea of dividing the cycle into four seasons: winter, spring, summer and autumn.

The overarching idea being that despite each individual's cycle being unique – including the accompanying symptoms – by learning to read the underlying patterns in our cycle, we can subsequently shape our lives to better support our overall physical, mental and emotional wellbeing.

“I like to view the menstrual cycle in seasons and live appropriately to each season in order to support hormonal health,” explains traditional Chinese medicine practitioner and founder of The Dao Health, Elizabeth Cullen.

“By understanding your menstrual cycle, you can then tailor your lifestyle and exercise according to each phase, supporting hormonal balance by accommodating the fluctuation of oestrogen and progesterone throughout the cycle – and overall improving quality of life when menstruating.”

While what's considered normal will vary from person to person – as Cullen explains, “it is imperative a person who menstruates understands each phase of their cycle and their associated symptoms to understand what a healthy menstrual cycle looks like for them,” – taking the time to learn and explore your body's cycle is of the utmost importance.

#### WINTER

Likely the season of our cycle we're all most familiar with, winter signifies “the period” and is marked by a sharp drop in both oestrogen and progesterone.

“Winter welcomes the menstrual bleed and this is the time of coming within, a deep time of Yin with rest and warmth,” Cullen says.

While the length of the period will vary, a healthy menstrual flow should last around 3-8 days and it is a time to offer our bodies the care and nourishment it likely craves.

“Ensure you keep the body warm to support blood flow, avoid leaving the house with wet hair and keep the abdomen and feet covered,” says Cullen. “Also avoid cold water immersion throughout the bleed and encourage slow and deliberate movement such as reformer pilates, heavy weights and walking. It's a time to avoid high-intensity interval training.”

In terms of nutrition, Cullen recommends hormone-friendly meals that also nurture blood flow. “If you eat red meat, have a period steak here as well as warming foods like The Dao Health's period porridge.”

#### SPRING

“Spring is the second half of the follicular phase, the first phase of the cycle after bleeding has stopped,” Cullen says. Other common names for this phase of the cycle include “pre-ovulatory” and “proliferative”, but in terms of what's happening on a hormonal level, this is when low progesterone levels have triggered the release of follicle stimulating hormone (FSH), encouraging the budding growth of follicles in the ovaries. Oestrogen is also beginning to rise at this point, which we can use to our advantage.

“It is during this time where you are able to increase training and movement as well as planning to be more social,” says Cullen.

Anecdotally, many women report feeling more energised, happy and focused at this point in their cycle and interestingly, there is also research to support this with studies illustrating how women are more likely to feel positive emotions rather than negative ones like anger during the late follicular phase.

#### SUMMER

While most of us consider our period to be the main event of our menstrual cycle, Cullen explains that in reality, it is ovulation that should take centre stage. “This is the summer of your cycle and is the time when you should be feeling your best with a boost of oestrogen,” she says.

Rising oestrogen triggers the release of luteinising hormone – the surge that instigates ovulation as the mature follicle bursts, releases its egg and allows it to journey down the fallopian tube in the hopes of fertilisation.

While some women can feel the moment of ovulation – often signified by a burst of pain on one side – many feel nothing. What you are more likely to notice from a physiological perspective, is the change in cervical mucus as it begins to look slippery, stretchy and more like eggwhites.

If you're feeling frisky, this is also not uncommon during ovulation and likely because nature wants you to get pregnant, with the surge of hormones at this time supporting your natural sexual desire.

"This is also the season of your cycle to aim to reach movement goals such as a PB running or to schedule a meeting or a date when you need increased confidence," Cullen says.

#### AUTUMN

What many women find frustrating is how after feeling on top of the world during ovulation, we can feel so crappy just a few days later.

"Autumn is the second half of the luteal phase when you question why you felt on top of the world last week and this week you feel flat with PMS symptoms," says Cullen. "This is due to an increase in progesterone in the body and to accommodate this hormonal change, it's important to slow down and come within."

The symptoms of PMS can also vary greatly but it's not uncommon to feel sluggish, sad, exhausted, suffer from food cravings, mood swings, headaches or find yourself struggling to sleep, retaining fluid or feeling more sensitive to pain. "Increased PMS symptoms are a reflection of a hormonal imbalance and can be managed and treated," Cullen says. "But it's also important to pull back in terms of your capacity at the gym, slow down socially and avoid alcohol through this phase. Instead, increase Yin activities such as meditation, having a bath and prioritising sleep."

You may also find you need to nourish your body from within to a greater degree during this season.

"The body is working hard to support the luteal phase and you need to increase food intake and ensure meals are warm to support blood flow to the reproductive organs."

Being kind to yourself during autumn is also key. "Be mindful when you schedule events during ovulation for this luteal phase," urges Cullen. "You may feel like going to these at the time of ovulation, but would prefer to rest when it comes to being in the luteal phase."

#### THE BOTTOM LINE

At the end of the day, there's no question our menstrual cycle can offer up deep insights, but it's vital we pay attention to our symptoms, rather than simply turning a blind eye.

Similarly, instead of berating ourselves for our seeming lack of productivity or unexplained fatigue, we need to reframe the narrative around our periods and adjust how we care for our bodies in each season.

"See living with the seasons of your menstrual cycle as working with your hormones rather than against them," says Cullen.

The hope being that if we do, we can thrive not only during our menstrual cycle, but at every stage, phase and season of our lives.