



Amenorrhea

WHAT IS AMENORRHEA?

Amenorrhea is the term used when a woman or adolescent girl is not having menstrual periods. There are two types of amenorrhea:

- **Primary amenorrhea:** when a girl has not started having periods by age 15 (or within 5 years of the first signs of puberty)
- **Secondary amenorrhea:** when a girl or woman has been having periods but then stops having them for at least 3 months

This fact sheet is about secondary amenorrhea that is not due to pregnancy.

DID YOU KNOW?

Absent periods are often a sign of another medical condition.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF SECONDARY AMENORRHEA?

Symptoms vary according to the cause. Women can have hot flashes, discharge of milk from the nipples, vaginal dryness, headaches, and vision changes. Some women develop acne and grow hair on the face and body. Many women have no symptoms other than the lack of periods.

WHAT CAUSES ABSENT PERIODS?

Women naturally stop menstruating during pregnancy, long-term breastfeeding, and menopause. Birth control pills and injections and hormone-containing IUDs cause amenorrhea in some women. A number of other conditions can cause secondary amenorrhea (see table on page 2).

HOW IS SECONDARY AMENORRHEA DIAGNOSED?

Your doctor will ask questions about your medical history and do a physical exam. You will have a pregnancy test. Your doctor will likely order blood tests to check levels of FSH, LH, TSH, and prolactin. Blood tests also can measure androgen levels and check for thyroid or adrenal gland disorders.

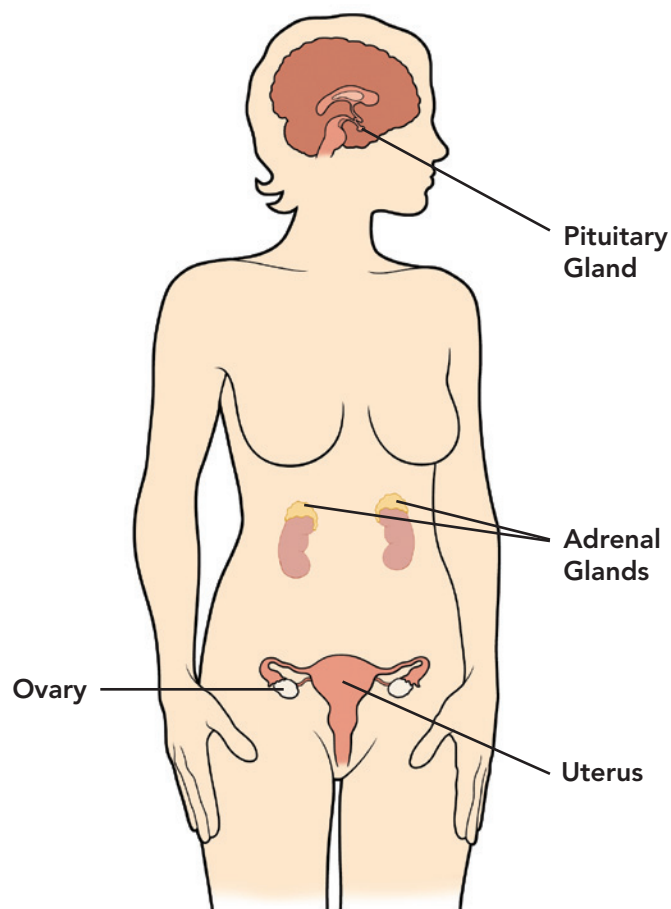
If you have primary ovarian insufficiency and you're under age 30, your doctor may check your chromosomes to see if a genetic abnormality is the cause. If your doctor thinks you may have a problem with your pituitary gland or hypothalamus, you will have an MRI, a brain imaging test. Some women also have imaging tests of their reproductive organs.

DEFINITIONS

- **Hypothalamus:** a part of the brain that controls the release of hormones made by the pituitary gland
- **Pituitary gland:** a gland located at the base of the brain that makes a number of hormones, including
 - **FSH** (follicle-stimulating hormone) and **LH** (luteinizing hormone)—hormones that regulate the menstrual cycle
 - **Prolactin**, a hormone that stimulates the production of breast milk after childbirth
 - **TSH** (thyroid-stimulating hormone), a hormone that regulates hormone production by the thyroid gland
- **Thyroid gland:** a gland in the neck that makes thyroid hormones, which control how the body uses and stores energy
- **Androgens:** male hormones made in small amounts by the ovaries and adrenal glands in women

CAUSES OF ABSENT PERIODS

Condition	Causes
Primary ovarian insufficiency, also called premature ovarian failure (menopause before age 40)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Abnormal chromosomes Immune disorders Damage to the ovaries from chemotherapy or radiation
Long-term lack of ovulation (release of an egg from the ovary) due to disorders of the hypothalamus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mental stress Weight loss and low body weight Eating disorders such as anorexia Excessive exercise Tumor of the hypothalamus
Long-term lack of ovulation due to disorders of the pituitary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased prolactin by a small benign tumor Pituitary damage Radiation to the head
Abnormal balance of other hormones	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Polycystic ovary syndrome Adrenal or thyroid gland disorders
Scarring of the uterus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some uterine procedures such as dilation and curettage (D & C) Infection



WHAT IS THE TREATMENT FOR ABSENT PERIODS?

The treatment depends on the cause of your amenorrhea.

Options for treatment include

- Medicines that help control abnormal hormone levels
- Surgery for tumors of the pituitary, ovaries, or adrenal glands
- Counseling about how to eat a balanced diet, keep a healthy weight, and cope with stress

Your doctor might also prescribe estrogen therapy to relieve hot flashes and vaginal dryness and to protect your bones. Calcium and vitamin D supplements, along with strength training, also help keep your bones strong.

If you are trying to get pregnant, other treatments might be needed.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT ABSENT PERIODS?

If you haven't had your period for more than 3 months, see your doctor. Most causes of secondary amenorrhea can be detected easily and treated successfully.

Questions to ask your doctor

- What is the main cause of my absent periods?
- What are my treatment options?
- What are the pros and cons of each of my treatment options?
- Should I see an endocrinologist for my condition?

RESOURCES

- Find-an-Endocrinologist: www.hormone.org or call 1-800-HORMONE (1-800-467-6663)
- Hormone Health Network information about PCOS and POF:
 - www.hormone.org (search for PCOS)
 - www.hormone.org (search for POF)
- Mayo Clinic information about amenorrhea: www.mayoclinic.com/health/amenorrhea/DS00581
- MedlinePlus (National Institutes of Health) information about secondary amenorrhea: www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001219.htm
- UpToDate.com, Patient information: Absent or irregular periods: www.uptodate.com (search for amenorrhea)

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The Hormone Health Network offers free, online resources based on the most advanced clinical and scientific knowledge from The Endocrine Society (www.endo-society.org). The Network's goal is to move patients from educated to engaged, from informed to active partners in their health care. This fact sheet is also available in Spanish at www.hormone.org/Spanish.

