

How Do I Know If I'm Pregnant?

The first indication that a woman might be pregnant is often a missed menstrual period. Home pregnancy test kits are available in most drug stores and many supermarkets and can help determine if you are pregnant. Sometimes, however, these tests might not be able to detect pregnancy if performed on the first day of a missed period.

An article in the October 10, 2001, issue of *JAMA* discusses the use of pregnancy testing in the first week after a missed period.

HOW HOME PREGNANCY TESTS WORK

Home pregnancy test kits involve placing urine on a prepared chemical strip. It usually takes 1 or 2 minutes for the strip to show the result. The strip tests for a hormone that is produced during pregnancy, **human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG)**. The test will only be positive (indicating you are pregnant) if you have enough hCG in your system when you do the testing. Depending on your menstrual cycle, and how early you are in your pregnancy, a home test kit can show a negative result (indicating you are not pregnant) even though you may actually be pregnant.

How To Be Sure

If you are late for your period and are using a home pregnancy test kit, wait 7 to 10 days before trying the test. Many test kits recommend testing "as early as the first day of the missed period," but testing early may lead to an inaccurate result.

If you tested yourself 7 to 10 days after the first missed period and your result was negative, wait a few more days; if your period does not start, try the test again.

Your doctor can perform a simple blood test by drawing blood from your arm and testing the levels of hCG in your blood to see if you are pregnant. Such blood tests are more accurate because they can detect lower levels of hCG than home pregnancy test kits.

If your home pregnancy test results are positive, be sure to make an appointment with your doctor right away. He or she may perform tests to verify your pregnancy and begin your prenatal care.

INFORM YOURSELF

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Sources: American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Mayo Clinic, National Institutes of Health

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POSSIBLE CAUSES OF A MISSED PERIOD

- Pregnancy is the most common cause of a missed period.
- Birth control pills—some women who use this form of contraception may not have periods. When you stop taking birth control pills, it can also lead to 3 to 6 months of missed or abnormal periods.
- Breastfeeding can cause missed periods, but you may still get pregnant without periods when you are breastfeeding.
- Certain medications can cause changes in your menstrual cycle. Check with your physician about changes if you are taking a new medication.
- Some illnesses can postpone your period; it will usually resume its normal cycle when you are healthy.
- Malnutrition and low body weight (possible results of poor eating habits) can cause disruptions in your cycle.
- Excessive exercise can disrupt the production of hormones in your body and stop menstruation.
- As menopause approaches, periods become irregular and eventually stop.

See your doctor to evaluate changes in your menstrual cycle.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
www.acog.org
800/762-2264
- National Library of Medicine
MEDLINEplus
800/336-4797
www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/003432.htm
- MayoClinic.com Healthy Living Centers
www.mayohealth.org

