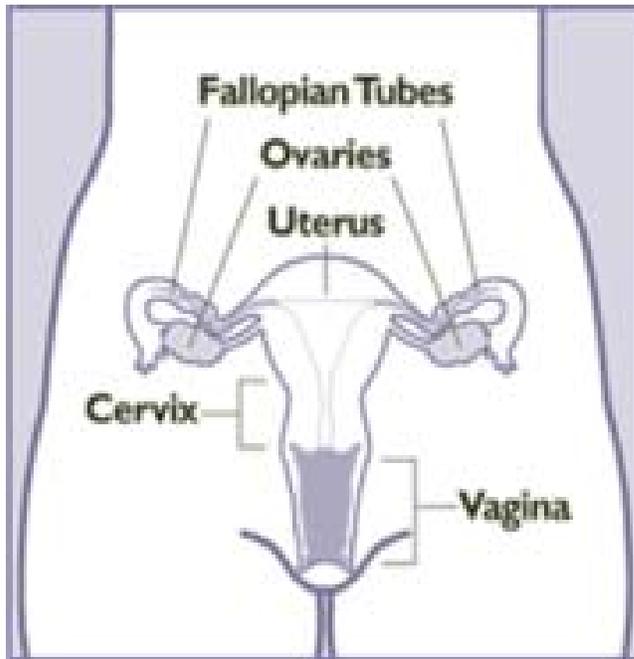


The Female Reproductive System

The vagina, cervix, uterus, fallopian tubes, and ovaries are the main structures of the female reproductive system. This system makes it possible for a woman to have a baby.



The vagina is a muscular, ridged sheath connecting the external genitals to the uterus.

The vagina ends at the cervix, the lower portion or neck of the uterus.

The uterus is the muscular organ which holds a developing baby during the nine months after conception.

Beyond the uterus, the fallopian tubes connect the rest of the system to the ultimate source of the eggs, the two ovaries.

The ovaries are a woman's storehouse of egg cells.

Menstruation (Monthly Cycle)

The term **menstruation** refers to the periodic shedding of the uterine lining. With every cycle, a woman's body prepares for a potential pregnancy, whether or not the woman wants to get pregnant. The average menstrual cycle takes about 28 days and occurs in phases: the follicular phase, the ovulatory phase (ovulation), and the luteal phase.

During the **follicular phase**, eggs within the ovaries are stimulated by hormones and begin developing. Eventually, one egg becomes dominant and the others die off. The dominant egg continues to release a hormone called estrogen. During the **ovulatory phase**, which begins around day 14 of a woman's cycle, the dominant egg is released from one of the ovaries. During the **luteal phase**, a hormone called progesterone is released from the corpus luteum (the follicle left over from where the egg was released), which thickens the uterus lining in preparation for a fertilized egg. The egg travels down the fallopian tubes and is fertilized by sperm if intercourse has occurred (**called conception**). The fertilized egg (**embryo**) is implanted in the uterus and the woman is considered pregnant. The baby will grow and develop for the next nine months in the uterus. If the egg is not fertilized, it passes into the uterus and out of the body when the uterus lining, called the endometrium, breaks down because it is no longer needed to support a pregnancy (**called menstruation**).