







IF Conversations

A conversation starter for independent facilitators to talk with athlete(s) on women's health, with the view to optimising performance in sport and in life.

Topic: Hormones and menstrual cycles

The menstrual cycle provides us with a critical monthly report card on the health of our hormones. The hormones oestrogen and progesterone are important because they influence many body systems including brain development, cognition, mood, digestion, the cardiovascular system, hydration, and metabolism. They are also particularly important for young athletes as they contribute to growth, development, repair/recovery of bone, muscle, ligaments and tendons.

What is a healthy menstrual cycle?

	Age	First period 8-16 years
	Length of period	3-7 days
	Length of cycle	21-35 days
	Blood Loss	Change pads/tampons \leq 3-4 hourly
	Pain	Any abdominal or pelvic pain should not affect everyday life – ovulation/period/other
	Pre-menstrual symptoms (PMS)	Falling estrogen and progesterone can cause lower back pain, abdominal cramps, bloating, fatigue, mood changes and food cravings

How many women suffer abnormalities?

20–30% of women suffer from endometriosis or poly cystic ovary syndrome, so abnormalities are reasonably common.

Creating safe environments, connections and support for my athlete

If you are supporting a female athlete, ask them if they have talked to anyone about women's health. Their culture, family, and friends may influence how they view menstrual cycles and other aspects of women's health. As an IF, your job is to raise awareness of the importance of hormones, and encourage your athlete(s) to seek specialist advice from their GP if needed (remember, we don't have a right to require the athlete to share information with us).

Resources

Sport New Zealand Resources:

Balanced Female Health | Sport New Zealand - Ihi Aotearoa (sportnz.org.nz)

Australian Institute of Sport Resources:

Female Performance & Health Initiative | Australian Institute of Sport (ais.gov.au)

What questions could I be asking my athlete?

- What do you know about the importance of hormones in your development as an athlete?
- Do you track your menstrual cycle every month, and understand what is normal for you?
- During your monthly cycle, do you experience any factors that disrupt your ability to train and compete as per the plan, for example pain, bleeding, fatigue, mood changes? Do you feel you have the information, support and tools to manage these symptoms?
- Did you know that hydration, sleep, and fuelling for energy can have a positive effect on your menstrual cycle? How do you track your sleep, hydration, and energy levels on a daily basis? What have you learnt from doing that?

How can I support my athlete?

- Encourage your athlete to contact their GP for further advice (or register with a GP if they don't have one) and check-in to see if things are improving. If not, encourage them to seek other options from their GP.
- Remind your athlete that there are many options for managing the various symptoms. Because everyone is a bit different, the best management can require a bit of trial and error to get the right tool.
- Refer your athlete to the information and resources on this page.