

Menstrual Cycle Awareness is the mindfulness practice for women and is intrinsic to women's wellbeing. Menstrual Cycle Awareness "the inner yoga for women" is a term used to describe the practice of paying attention to where you are in your cycle each day, what you are experiencing and how to care for your changing cyclical needs. Through the practice of cycle awareness you can discover the inner seasons of your cycle and get to know your own seasonal pattern. When you know your unique cyclical pattern you can learn how to live and practice (yoga) in sync with your cycle.

As women, our hormones change from week to week causing shifts in our bodies physically, mentally, and emotionally. We are cyclical beings and follow not only the daily 24-hour circadian rhythm, rhyming with wake-sleep cycles, but also a 28-day infradian rhythm, naturally governed by a woman's monthly hormonal cycle. A circadian rhythm is what regulates the sleep-wake cycle for all living things on earth roughly every 24 hours. For men their hormone cycle is within this 24 hour period with testosterone being high in the morning and low in the evening. Infradian cycles are cycles that last longer than 24 hours. Some examples of infradian cycles are migration, hibernation, seasonal rhythms and of course the 28-day menstrual cycle. During this 28 day cycle women's hormones fluctuate day to day.



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HORMONAL CHANGES IN THE FOUR PHASES

There are four major phases of each infaridan cycle: menstrual, follicular, ovulatory, and luteal. There are two main hormones that fluctuate throughout your cycle: estrogen and progesterone. These hormones affect your appetite, energy levels, sex drive, productivity, and more. When you intentionally support your four phases of your cycle, life becomes easier and more understandable.

Menstrual

The first phase of your cycle is menstruation. The first day you bleed is day 1. Both your primary sex hormones estrogen and progesterone are at their lowest levels. Your body is shedding its uterine lining. The first few days your energy is typically low as your body is focused on releasing, but towards the end of menstruation, you may feel your energy start to increase. The menstrual phase occurs on cycle days 1 to 6.

Follicular

As your period comes to an end, you enter your follicular phase. The pituitary gland produces a hormone called follicle stimulating hormone (FSH), telling your ovaries to prepare an egg. One of your follicles, a fluid sac containing eggs, becomes dominant and largest in preparation for ovulation. That dominant follicle produces estrogen, which increases as it grows. Your uterus responds to that rise in estrogen by thickening or rebuilding the uterine lining in preparation for a potential pregnancy. With the rise in estrogen, you may feel creative and inspired to take action after the low energy felt during your period. This phase is approximately cycle days 6 to 12 days, depending on your cycle.

Ovulatory

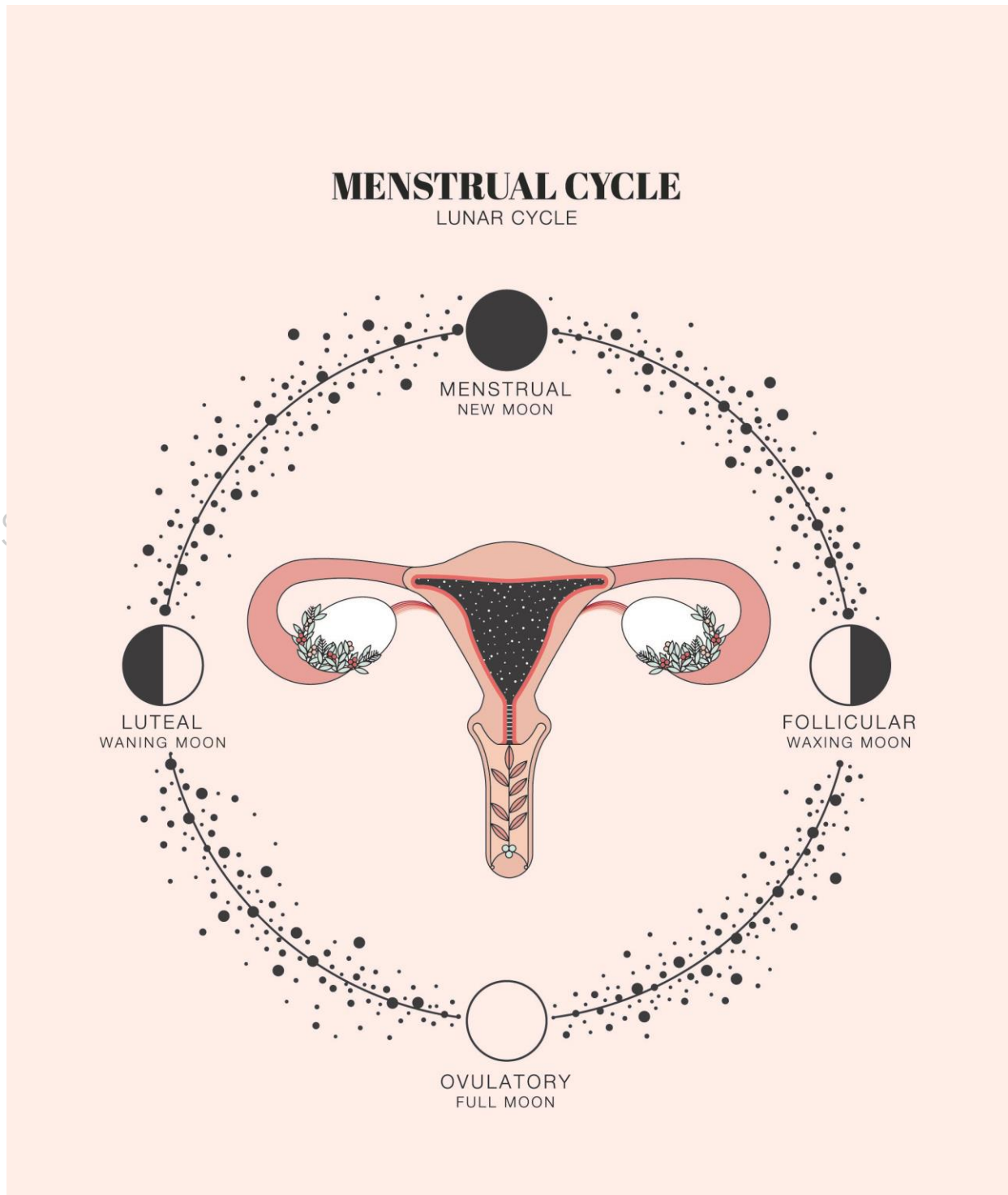
Ovulation is the whole goal of your menstrual cycle, if you don't ovulate you will never experience any of the three other phases. During the ovulatory phase, your estrogen is at its peak, and once levels are high enough, your brain gets the signal to release a dramatic increase in luteinizing hormone (LH), which causes the release of the egg into the fallopian tube. The egg implants to your uterus and can be fertilized for the next 24 hours. With estrogen at its peak along with a spike in testosterone, you may feel like a superwoman, energized, motivated, and ready to get it on. The ovulation phase usually lasts between cycle days 12 to 19 but may vary by person or by cycle.

Luteal

After ovulation comes the luteal phase. Your estrogen drop, signaling for the follicle containing the egg to transform into a hormone gland called the corpus luteum. This gland is what produces progesterone. Progesterone signals your uterine lining to stop thickening and start preparing for potential pregnancy. When this hormone is supported, it can make us feel calm, wanting to retreat from the world and focus on personal creativity and paying extra attention to details in life. This phase usually gets a bad rap if you experience mood swings, headaches, acne, bloating, breast tenderness, or any other effects of post menstrual syndrome (PMS). If the egg does not become fertilized, the corpus luteum breaks down, resulting in a drop in estrogen and progesterone leading to menstruation. This phase is approximately cycle days 19 to 28 but varies by individual.

MEN REFLECT THE SUN, WOMEN REFLECT THE MOON

To better understand, we can compare the different phases of our cycle to the phases of the moon. Menstruation is like a new moon, the follicular phase is as a waxing moon; ovulation is like a full moon, and the luteal phase is our waning moon. Many women actually have their cycle linked up with the moon and menstruate with the new moon, known as the white moon cycle, the time when most fertile and in the mothering phase of her life. On the other hand, the red moon cycle is when menstruation occurs during a full moon and these women are typically more interested in learning, teaching, creativity, and self-growth, rather than child rearing. Neither cycle is better than the other, but just different depending on the stage of life.



PRACTICE / EXERCISE

If you are someone who likes to challenge yourself on the mat, then cycle syncing is a great way to take note of when is the best time to do this.

You'll know when you are going through a phase in which you have lots of energy and can push your body physically, as well as knowing not to be too hard on yourself if you are struggling with certain asanas. We have all experienced those days when it feels like showing up on the mat is a chore and it turns out this might also be down to our hormones.

Menstrual Cycle Awareness removes the pressure of feeling like you constantly have to show up just as 'good' or 'strong' as you were yesterday. In fact, it helps us to realize that 'powering through' on those days we don't necessarily want to, may actually mean we are depleting our body rather than energizing it.

During the menstrual phase our body already releases so much energy through bleeding that we should focus on rest and simple movements. The engagement of Mula Bandha and Uddiyana banda during our practice contradict the downward flow of Apana Vayu and we don't want to contradict this downward flow of energy, this is a cleansing process. According to Ayurveda, your moon time is a time for renewal. A time when your body is detoxifying and cleansing both physically and energetically.

The follicular phase is the phase after menstruation in which estrogen and testosterone start rising. It will probably give us a welcomed boost of energy and makes us feel more alert and focused. On average, it lasts to around the 14th day of your cycle.

During the ovulation phase the body is preparing to release an egg and estrogen and testosterone are peaking. This is a shorter phase and lasts for around 1-3 days. This is the point in your cycle at which your energy will be the highest. You might find inversions helpful during this time to keep your energy steady and balanced – spend more time with the finishing sequence.

Estrogen and testosterone will start to decline as your body produces progesterone during the luteal phase. During the beginning phase of this phase, you may still feel like you have a lot of energy; however it is likely in the second half of the phase that the energy will begin to dip again. This is when we will want to start scaling the intensity of our asana practice back. Listen to the body and honor how you are feeling. Particularly in the latter phase, use props like blocks to create long, deep holds to nourish the body or twists to melt away any tension that has been building. This is when your body might begin to crave a restorative practice as you come closer to starting your period.

FOODS, NUTRIENTS AND COOKING METHODS

The phases of your cycle also mirror the seasons of the year. Using the season as a reference can make understanding your own cycle much easier.

Certain foods and cooking methods blend nicely with your infradian phase and help support proper hormone balance. Remember these foods are not an absolute necessity and are only used as a guide. Don't forget to refer to your Ayurvedic constitution when creating a meal plan. We naturally may crave more raw fresh foods in the spring and summer phase of our cycle and warm cooked foods during the fall and winter phase of our cycle. Lastly, the amount of food you eat likely varies throughout the phases, eating less during the first half and more during the second half. The guide below is based on traditional Chinese medicine as well as just eating with the seasons.

The Seasons and Your Cycle

Menstrual
Inner Winter



Follicular
Inner Spring



Luteal
Inner Fall



Ovulatory
Inner Summer



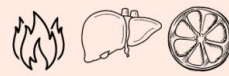
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Save for
later

Nutrients to Support Your Cycle

Menstrual

warm foods red meat vitamin C



magnesium ginger extra salt



- Great time for soup & stews -

cool foods fermented foods fresh fruits & veggies



antioxidants zinc phytoestrogens (if tolerated)



- Great time for sauteing & steaming -

Follicular

Luteal

warm foods magnesium slow burning carbs



carrot salad calcium eat every 3-4 hours



- Great time for roasting and baking -

cool foods choline aged cheese



oysters fresh fruits & veggies coffee (after food)



- Great time for salads, juice, raw foods -

Ovulatory

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later

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