

GO WITH YOUR FLOW

Tailoring your exercise routine to your menstrual cycle could be your secret weapon to maximising your performance. Here's how...

WORDS: Joanna Ebsworth

A period can make anyone feel like skipping exercise. You might even think that working out while menstruating is a complete waste of time, following a recent global survey from Strava that shows 88 per cent of women believe their training performance is at its worst when they're on their period. Add to that a new survey from adidas which claims that one in four girls around the world drops out of sport in adolescence, citing fear of leakage while on their period as a key reason, and the odds against exercising on your period start stacking up.

But while cosying up under the safety of your duvet might seem preferable to a sweaty workout session, you could be missing a useful way of

alleviating your symptoms of menstruation and optimising your training results if you choose the right kind of exercise. Indeed, learning to work with your body, and not against it, by adapting your workouts to your menstrual cycle – a technique known as phase-based training – could empower you to perform at your full potential, whatever the time of the month. And, with the right period-protecting kit to keep you feeling comfortable

and secure, you'll never want to skip another workout again.

FIND YOUR RHYTHM

If you're clueless about your cycle and still taking a one-size-fits-all approach to fitness, don't feel bad. Most performance, training and nutrition guidelines are based largely on research in men – only four per cent of sports science studies in 2014 were carried out on women – and it's

this serious lack of female-specific research that has resulted in many of us being less than body literate. Thankfully, this antiquated approach is changing, as emerging research shows hormonal fluctuations throughout the whole menstrual cycle can have a range of effects on everything from your energy levels, heart rate and body temperature to hydration, recovery and susceptibility to injury.

'Hormones control how we act, move and feel, and change daily throughout our cycle, so we need to be prepared to adapt our workouts to feel the best we can,' says Maria Eleftheriou, head of Barre at Psytle (psytlelondon.com). 'When the body is stressed, physically or psychologically, it stops regulating hormones, sending it into fight-or-flight mode by spiking and then crashing our cortisol levels. If hormones are

imbalanced, the wrong form of exercise can sometimes create more stress on the adrenal glands and metabolism. Barre, for example, can help manage anxiety, boost mood and prevent excessive cortisol being released, which will help with food cravings.'

When it comes to selecting appropriate types of exercise for different phases of your menstrual cycle, Alana Murrin, head of Ride at Psyche, admits she's been in the dark until recently: 'I'm in my mid-thirties and only just starting to learn about my period and how it affects my body. That's almost 25 years of not really understanding how I should be approaching my workouts. But it's important also to acknowledge that there are women who suffer some very extreme symptoms,' she adds. 'If your workout puts you in pain or discomfort, then I really don't think it's a case of "powering through". However, I think we all need to claim ownership over our own cycles and workouts in a way that honours our bodies.'

GET IN SYNC

To hack the power of your hormones, you'll need to start tracking your cycle. There are a range of free period-tracking apps available to help you understand and predict your cycle, including Flo (flo.health), Clue (helloclue.com) and FitrWoman (fitrwoman.com), the latter of which

provides personalised training and nutritional suggestions tailored to your changing hormones, and was used by the US Women's National Soccer Team to plan training around players' periods in the lead up to the 2019 World Cup (which they won).

Next, you need to deepen your knowledge of the phases in your cycle so you can tailor your workouts accordingly. There are four phases in your cycle which, on average, last around 28 days:

Menstruation (Days 1-5)

'During the menstrual phase, your uterus is shedding the lining it has built up throughout the month, and your progesterone and oestrogen levels will be at their lowest which, along with the loss of blood, may cause you to feel low on energy,' says Dr Ghazala Aziz-Scott from the Marion Gluck Clinic (mariongluckclinic.com). She therefore suggests trying restorative, low-intensity workouts such as yoga, Pilates and Barre to provide a gentle but effective form of movement that will encourage the release of feel-good endorphins to help reduce pain and inflammation.

Follicular phase (Days 6-14)

'In the follicular phase, oestrogen – a natural anti-inflammatory – levels are rising, so pain endurance and response to injury is improved, while

Q CAN I USE A MENSTRUAL CUP WHEN I WORK OUT?

Meghan Holton, Saalt Menstrual Cup expert (saaltco.uk), says: 'Healthy living is a pretty big deal here at Saalt, so kudos to you for keeping active. Because we designed the Saalt Cup to fit snugly inside your vaginal canal, you can maintain the same level of activity that you do when you're not on your period. In fact, because you can safely wear a cup for up to 10 hours, you'll never need to worry about changing your cup before, during or immediately after your workout, and you'll find cups in various sizes to fit different flows and vaginas. If you're a yoga enthusiast, you can rest easy knowing that your flexible, squidgy cup will move with your body unlike rigid tampons, and the seal created between your cup and vaginal walls should allow you to breeze through those asanas without a fear of tampon slippages or leakages. Go ahead and swim, dance and run, free of bulky pads or dangling strings.'

higher levels of testosterone result in increased muscle and strength gains and higher energy levels. This is the perfect time to hit the weights or do some high-intensity training,' adds Dr Aziz-Scott.

Ovulation (Days 15-23)

It all changes again at the beginning of ovulation. 'You'll experience a peak in oestrogen,' explains Dr Aziz-Scott, 'which can sometimes cause ligament laxity, meaning risk of injury could be higher, so it's essential that you perform thorough warm-ups before exercise.'

Luteal phase (Days 24-28)

Finally, in the luteal phase, your body temperature increases so you may fatigue more quickly, meaning that shorter and less-intense

workouts are best. 'Progesterone also peaks, causing protein and muscle breakdown, so it's a good time to switch to moderate-intensity exercise, prioritise recovery and eat more protein to enable the body to repair,' concludes Dr Aziz-Scott.

THE NEXT LEVEL

If you're finding all of this slightly overwhelming, there is an easier alternative. Several fitness platforms are now leading the way with personalised workout programmes that work with your cycle and symptoms, including the new clinically backed Phase & Function programme from movement specialists, P.volve (\$19.99 a month; pvolve.com), which combines movement, mind and meals. The aim is to

//// MENSTRUAL TRACKING

help you listen to your body and satisfy it with the exercise, nutrition and rest it's craving, rather than a 'go hard or go home' mentality, which can stunt progress towards your goals. Visit womensfitness.co.uk to try our exclusive workout from the P.volve Phase & Function programme.

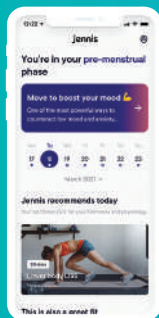
Another service comes in the form of the Jennis Cyclemapping programme from Olympic athlete Jessica Ennis-Hill, designed to improve hormone balance, increase energy levels, reduce PMT and provide more efficient fitness gains (£14.99 a month; jennis.com). 'I've been in sport my whole life, but it was only towards the latter part of my career that the science of matching workouts to your menstrual cycle got touched upon. Even then, it felt taboo,' says Ennis-Hill. 'Making this knowledge accessible to everyone is something I'm really passionate about, so that

women can train in line with their unique menstrual cycles, do what's right for their bodies and feel amazing as a result.'

The final word about exercising on your period goes to GB long jumper, Jazmin Sawyers, who took part in the launch of adidas' new TechFit Period Proof

collection (from £35; adidas.com): 'If we as athletes can do it, so can you. You can perform well in sports despite your period. It doesn't define you, but you have to learn to adjust and manage it as best as you can. Remember

that the women you see playing sports, whether as amateurs or on a more professional level, have probably dealt with something similar and faced certain challenges that come from being athletes and people who menstruate. But they've managed to find a way to do both by understanding what their bodies need and by leaning on others for support.'



PERIOD-PROOF YOUR WORKOUT

Experiencing uncomfortable symptoms and worrying about the possibility of leakage while exercising? There are positive steps you can take, including dressing for comfort and security. 'Look for fabrics that are soft on your skin while still offering durability,' says Katie Higginbotham, personal trainer and TrainFitness tutor (train.fitness). 'Avoid tight, restrictive clothing around the tummy if you're experiencing pain, but do choose high-waisted bottoms that stay in place or select styles with built-in protection.' Most importantly, she adds, choose period products you're comfortable with: 'If you're not used to wearing tampons, this isn't the time to try them out as they can be painful and uncomfortable when not inserted correctly. And don't forget you can combine products to prevent leakages – it's simply a case of finding what works best for you.'

Dame Reusable Period Pad

£10.99; wearedame.com

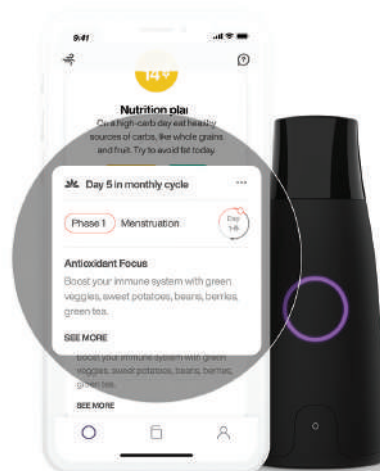
This pad features bamboo fibres to wick moisture away from the skin, while a thin, liquid-proof membrane provides extra security against leaks. The innovative odour-free, airtight and watertight Dame Dry Bag, £9.99, allows you to change your pads on the go.



Lumen

£299; lumen.me

The hand-held device and app tracks your metabolism based on the CO2 concentration of a single breath, helping you to understand whether you're burning fats or carbs. Its ground-breaking cycle-tracking feature lets you adapt your nutrition to the various phases of your cycle, so you can make the right nutritional decisions to restore iron levels, curb fatigue, regulate blood sugar, improve sleep and keep energy levels elevated, sending information to your phone or Apple watch.



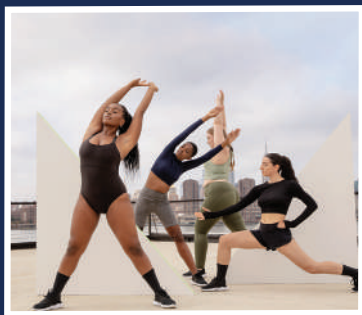


Garmin Venu 2S Smart Watch
 £349.99; garmin.com
 This GPS-tracking watch has a menstrual cycle tracking feature via the Garmin Connect app, so you can log physical and emotional symptoms and get exercise and nutrition advice, too!



Wuka Perform Seamless Midi Briefs for Heavy Flows

£22.99; wuka.co.uk
 Available in sizes 2XS to 4XL, these VPL-free, full coverage briefs hold up to the equivalent of four tampons.



Thinx apparel

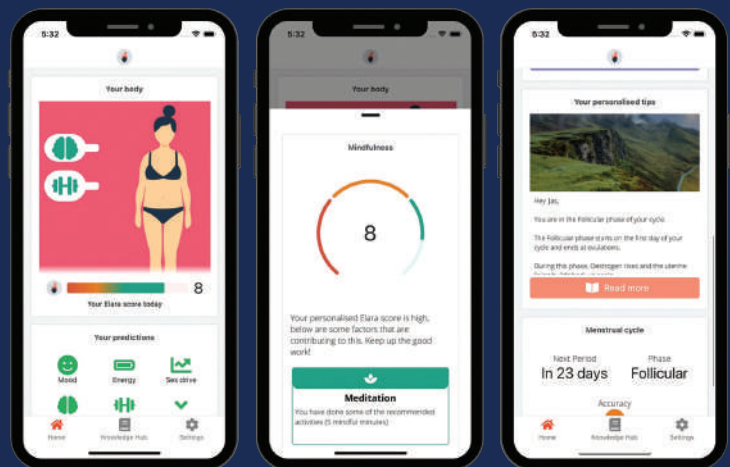
From £48.35; shethinx.com
 Thinx has an amazing line of stylish activewear with built-in period protection, including leggings, shorts and leotards, offering absorbency levels from two to five regular tampons.

Intimina Lily Cup One
 £19.99; intimina.com
 This is perfect for first-time users, thanks to the secure loop that aids easy removal, plus a compact, collapsible design that fits into a discrete case.




Modibodi Swimsuit Recycled One Piece

£65.50; modibodi.co.uk
 This swimsuit has a fast-absorbing lining that is perfect for spotting and lighter days, or use it as extra protection on heavy days.



Elara

Free; elara.care
 Female health app, Elara, provides women with personalised exercise, nutrition, sleep and mental wellness recommendations. There are also actionable tips tailored to your hormones and different phases of your menstrual cycle, so you can harness the unique power of your physiology.