

# sex talk.

answers to your questions about sex and relationships

**factoid** Introducing SexTalk Express – get SexTalk delivered right to your email every Monday. Go to [www.health.arizona.edu](http://www.health.arizona.edu) and sign up under the “What’s New” section.

**Q.** When is the least likely time to get pregnant if you are sexually active? Is it before your period or after? I use protection but I was curious as to which was the safest time to have sex during my menstrual cycle.

**A.** Fortunately, learning about the menstrual cycle is a lot easier than studying the Krebs cycle, and considerably more interesting than the carbon cycle. Here’s how it works:

In a typical 28 day cycle, Day 1 represents the first day that menstrual bleeding begins.

Between Day 7 and Day 11, the lining of the uterus thickens and becomes awash in hormones like estrogen. On Day 14, the egg is released, signaling the start of the second half of the cycle, also known as ovulation. If the egg comes into contact with a single male sperm, then the process that leads to pregnancy begins. If not, the egg disintegrates and the lining of the uterus sloughs off to become the next menstrual flow.

A woman is most likely to become pregnant around two weeks before the expected date of her next period. Since sperm can last up to five days inside a woman’s body and an unfertilized egg can last only 24 hours, there is about a six day window when a woman is at her most fertile.

In reality, most women have cycles that range from 21 to 35 days, and the 28 day cycle just represents an average number. And while the number of days in the first half of the cycle leading up to ovulation can vary among women, the second half – from ovulation to menstruation – is roughly the same two weeks for all women.

As you suggest, “timing” sexual activity to avoid pregnancy is far from perfect in its effectiveness by itself, so your best options include abstinence, birth control pills or condoms.

For an animated flash movie’s fun and informative take on the menstrual cycle, check out [www.plannedparenthood.org](http://www.plannedparenthood.org). Once you are there, search for “How Pregnancy Happens” and click on the first search result on the next screen.

Have a question? Send it to [sextalk@email.arizona.edu](mailto:sextalk@email.arizona.edu)

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