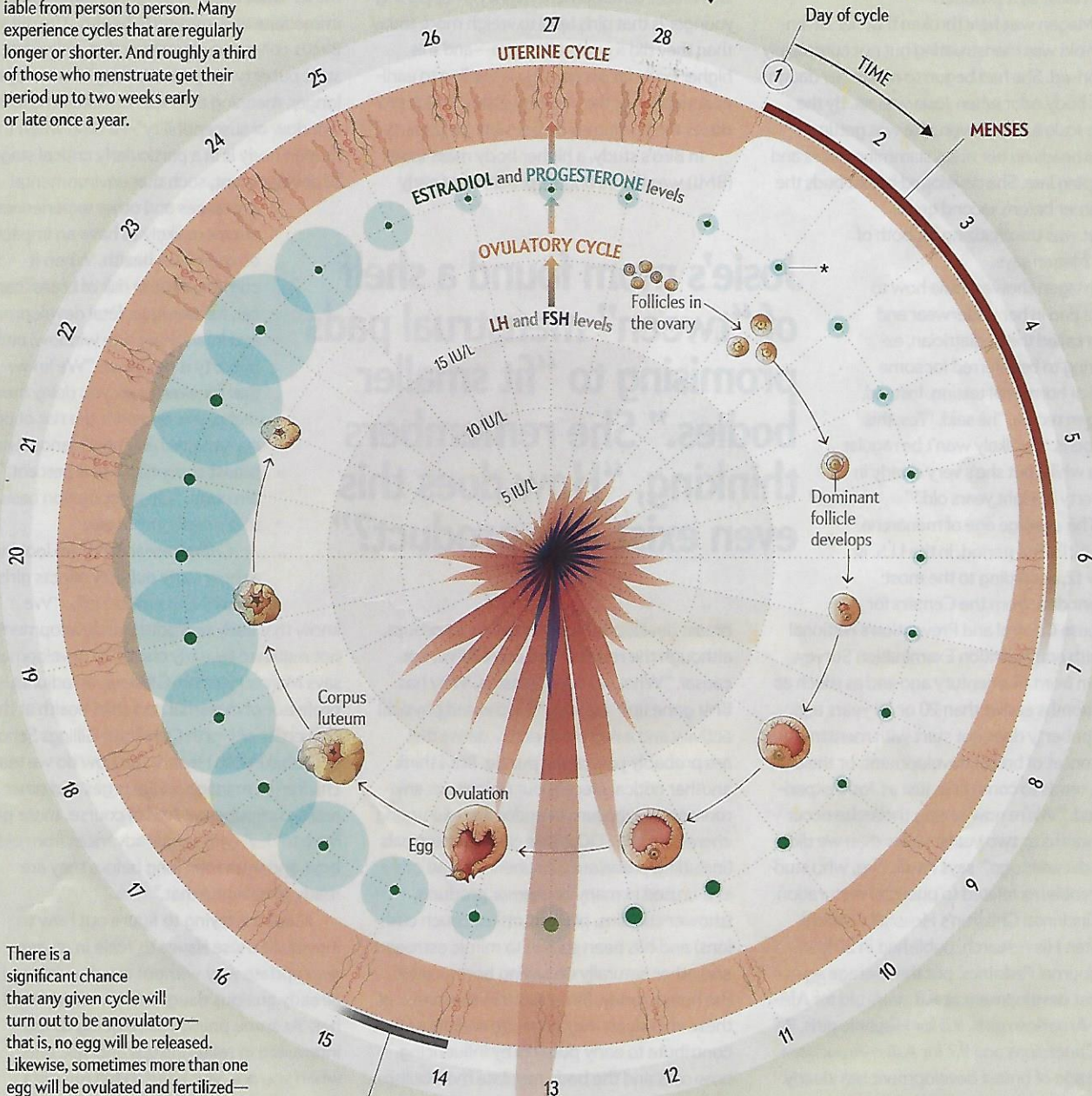
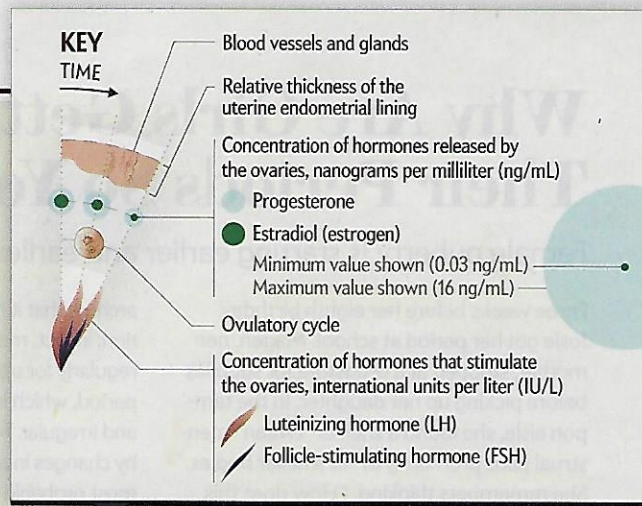


The Menstrual Cycle

Humans are among the very few species to experience a period. The menstrual cycle starts in the brain, which sends signals to the pituitary gland (*not shown*) to produce hormones that stimulate the ovaries. The ovaries house egg-containing follicles that release an egg during ovulation. The ovaries also secrete hormones to help prepare the uterus to host an embryo, which results if the egg is fertilized by a sperm. If no embryo implants, the uterus disposes of its lining, and the cycle begins again.

The average menstrual cycle is 28 days long, but the length is surprisingly variable from person to person. Many experience cycles that are regularly longer or shorter. And roughly a third of those who menstruate get their period up to two weeks early or late once a year.



There is a significant chance that any given cycle will turn out to be anovulatory—that is, no egg will be released. Likewise, sometimes more than one egg will be ovulated and fertilized—an outcome that can lead to fraternal twins or higher-order multiples.

Egg is viable for fertilization for up to 24 hours

*Low levels of hormones may persist, even when the ovaries are not actively producing them.

SOURCE: "CIRCULATING IMMUNOREACTIVE INHIBIN LEVELS DURING THE NORMAL HUMAN MENSTRUAL CYCLE," BY R. I. M. CLACHAN ET AL., IN JOURNAL OF CLINICAL ENDOCRINOLOGY & METABOLISM, VOL. 65, NO. 5, NOVEMBER 1, 1987 (HORMONE LEVEL DATA); JERILYNN C. PRIOR, University of British Columbia, Center for Menstrual Cycle and Ovulation Research (consultant)