

Morgane Leten



Decode Your Cycle

*Harness Your Natural Hormones and
Thrive Through Every Menstrual Phase*

Lannoo

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CHAPTER 1

How to live according to your cycle

How to live according to your cycle

Living in sync with your cycle may sound complicated, but it's not. I plan much of my life around my cycle. It may sound exaggerated, but I keep the phases of my cycle in mind in everything I do. In fact, now that I am pregnant while writing this book, I am a bit lost and missing the four seasons of my cycle to make better decisions. Believe me, it's worth a try. Your body and hormones will thank you.

What do you need to live according to your cycle?

- A natural cycle: this is what you have when you don't use artificial hormones like the pill, a vaginal ring or a hormonal IUD.
- A notebook or app to track symptoms such as mood, libido, sleep, cravings, cervical mucus...
- A thermometer to measure your basal body temperature.
- Patience and a little discipline for self-observation.
- Joy to embrace your body and cycle.

DISCOVERING YOUR OVULATION

The concept of living in harmony with your natural cycle, known as “The Cycle Syncing Method®” was introduced by hormone expert Alisa Vitti, author of *WomanCode* and *In The Flo*. These two books have completely changed my life. One of the lessons I learned from Alisa, and which was a real eye-opener, is how to live according to your cycle. It is a lifestyle where you fully connect with who you truly are. That may sound a bit woo-woo, but it's not. This way of life is based on your hormones, which control pretty much everything in your body, including your mind and energy.

By following the rhythm of your cycle, you become more aware of the unique needs of each phase and respond to them accordingly. Living in harmony with your cycle allows you to embrace your natural rhythm, help-

ing to relieve symptoms like chronic stress, burnout, PMS, heavy periods, and mood swings.

How do you do that in practice, live according to your cycle? By tracking your cycle, and more specifically your ovulation. The peak of our menstrual cycle, which in fact is what everything revolves around, is ovulation, the moment when a mature egg is released from the ovary. The mature egg leaves the follicle and is taken up by the fallopian tube. An egg cell remains fertile for about 24 hours after ovulation. Fertilization occurs in the fallopian tube when a sperm cell has managed to get that far. If there is no sperm ready to fertilize the egg, the body rejects the unfertilized egg, along with the built-up endometrium. And so you get your period. Before that whole process, our body prepares itself every month. If you stop and think about it, you realize what an amazing machine the female body is, right? Read more about it as of page 42.

If you want to learn to live according to the seasons, I recommend to track your cycle so that you know when your ovulation takes place, because a healthy cycle is a fertile cycle. Hormonal contraceptives work by suppressing ovulation, with the pill being a prime example, as it completely prevents ovulation. The bleeding you experience during the pill-free week isn't a true menstrual period but rather a withdrawal bleed. As a result, you miss out on many phases of the natural menstrual cycle. By taking artificial hormones daily, you block your natural hormonal patterns and suppress your ovulation, so you won't get pregnant. Furthermore, artificial hormones can have side effects that we are often not aware of (see p. 148). Not that the pill only brings disadvantages with it. It remains a reliable contraceptive method that is still often prescribed by gynecologists. But it is also important to inform yourself well about which contraceptive method suits you as well as the advantages and disadvantages of each method. Do you take the pill because you have a difficult menstruation, an irregular cycle, severe cramps or acne? There are other options. The pill relieves your symptoms, but does not solve the underlying cause.

What happens now in concrete terms during such an ovulation? As a fetus of about five months, we as women have the largest number of potential eggs

in our entire lives, around seven million. When we are born, there are 'only' two million and at the first menstruation in puberty, there are still 400,000 left. The egg cells are stored in follicles or vesicles and wait in the ovaries. During the first half of your cycle (the follicular phase), a number of follicles start to mature. The so-called follicle cohort emerges curious, as if to see if they are not going to miss the party. Only one of the follicles matures completely and embarks on the great adventure: ovulation. The ovary in which ovulation occurs can vary from cycle to cycle, as can the timing. Often it is thought that ovulation, and therefore the fertile period, occurs exactly in the middle of your cycle. In many biology books, the fourteenth day of the cycle is often referred to as the day of ovulation, but that usually deviates. With a short cycle, ovulation often occurs very early, sometimes as early as the eighth, ninth or tenth day. During long cycles, it can even take several weeks and occur at a time when you would actually expect your next period again. Eventually, the egg cell travels to one of the fallopian tubes and remains fertilizable for 24 hours for a potential encounter with a sperm cell. The remaining follicles shrink and disappear.

YOU HAVE MORE CONTROL OVER YOUR CYCLE THAN YOU THINK

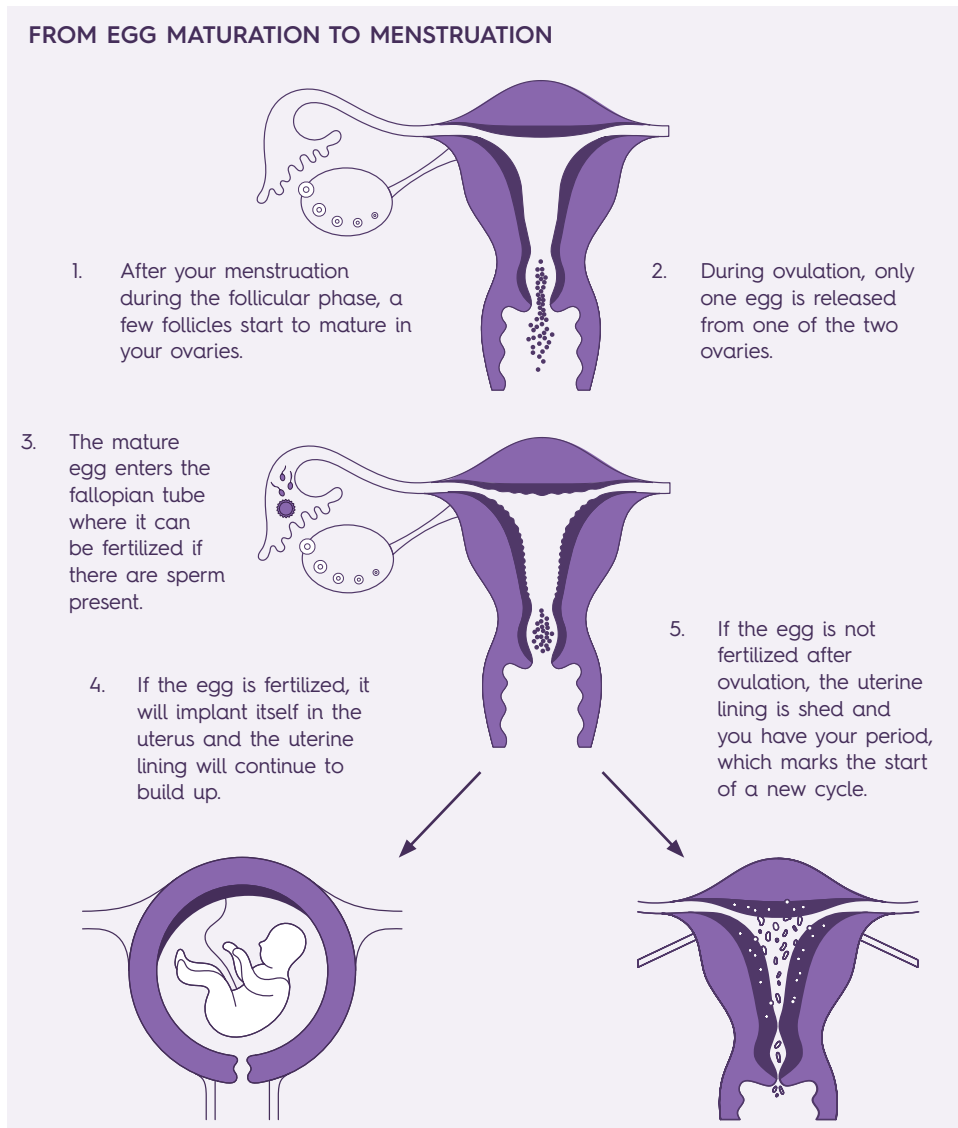
Do you have control over how your cycle progresses? Actually yes, more than you think. Not only your age, but also your lifestyle has an impact on the quality of the egg cells. Some studies show that your eating habits can play a role in maintaining the quality of your egg cells.

The healthier your egg cell and follicle (egg sac), the better the hormones estrogen and progesterone can be produced. These are important for a healthy menstrual cycle. Midwife **Rebecca Verhofstede** says: 'Egg cells undergo various changes over a period of three months to prepare themselves for a possible ovulation. During this time, the genetic material is being copied and there must be absolutely no errors, as this determines the quality of the egg cell.'

The hormones present in your body, your diet, the blood and oxygen supply, the amount of cellular energy produced, and stress all have an influence on the maturation of the egg cell and therefore on its further quality. The greatest effect of adjusting your diet, addressing stress, and taking supplements on egg cell quality is achieved when you have been working on it for at least three months.

You won't see immediate effects when you change your lifestyle, but after three months you should start seeing results and, for example, experience fewer complaints if you had any. Throughout the seasons, I will give you a guide on what foods are good for each phase. You can also read more about the impact of stress as of page 76.

If we were to depict the maturation of the egg cell and ovulation in a drawing, it would look like this:



Tracking your ovulation or egg release lies at the heart of getting to know your body. It is useful because this way you can learn to live according to the four seasons of your cycle. First and foremost, you know what to expect, and when, from your body and mind. When we talk about the menstrual cycle, we often only think about the days when a woman is bleeding. They are usually experienced as dirty and miserable. When you ovulate, you usually have a lot of energy and you feel good. If you are aware of your body and your cycle, you can prepare and make the most of each phase.

You can also learn to interpret your body's signals **to avoid pregnancy** by tracking your basal temperature and monitoring changes in your cervical mucus. The consistency of your cervical mucus changes throughout your cycle, providing valuable insights into each phase (and indicating whether you're fertile or not). You might sometimes notice a wet spot in your underwear. Sometimes it is white, sometimes transparent, sometimes there is a lot of mucus and sometimes little. It is part of you and your amazing body. Whatever you call it, all of it is mucus that is produced by your cervix. It protects your uterus from intruders, but also tells you a lot about your cycle and your health.

Finally, tracking your ovulation is also helpful if you're **trying to conceive**. Ovulation is actually the ideal time to enjoy some intimacy.

What happens to your eggs when you take the pill?

Hormonal contraceptive methods such as the pill, the vaginal ring, or the hormonal IUD suppress your ovulation. That means that while eggs do mature in your ovaries, they do not reach their maximum growth and are not released from the ovary to be fertilized. The matured eggs do not survive. They die off and are then absorbed by the body. So you don't build up any extra stock of eggs when you take hormonal contraception.

HOW TO TRACK YOUR OVULATION

Figuring out your fertile days and ovulation isn't so hard, right? Ovulation always happens exactly in the middle of your cycle, doesn't it? Unfortunate-

ly, ovulation doesn't always occur halfway through your menstrual cycle. The moment of ovulation can vary from woman to woman and from cycle to cycle. The phase when your egg matures can last from the eighth day after the start of your cycle to when you are almost expecting your period. If you track only your menstruation, you can never be sure when you ovulate.

How do you know when you are ovulating? The best way to calculate this is to map out your cycle using the symptothermal method, such as Sensiplan. With this method, you learn to observe and map various body signals, so that you can determine your fertile and infertile days reliably using specific calculation rules. That helps you to identify your ovulation or egg release.

1. **Your basal body temperature is elevated.** If you measure your temperature daily at approximately the same time, in the morning before getting up, and have had enough sleep, your temperature can rise by 0.2 to 0.6 °C up to two days after ovulation. This is done by the hormone progesterone.

The temperature remains high and drops just before or during the next menstruation back to the lowest temperature level. Please note that ovulation can sometimes occur without a rise in temperature. Therefore, it is recommended to analyze two or three cycles to accurately track your ovulation.

2. **The texture of your cervical mucus changes.** In the lead-up to your ovulation, your cervical mucus is stretchy and/or transparent. By checking the texture of your cervical mucus daily, you can predict an upcoming ovulation. Below we will tell you more about your cervical mucus.

3. **Your cervix changes.** The firmness, degree of opening, and position of your cervix change throughout your menstrual cycle. As your ovulation approaches, your cervix will open more, become softer, and rise higher.

As I mentioned above, your cervical mucus changes during your cycle. In the lead-up to your ovulation, the quality of your cervical mucus increases, allowing sperm to survive better and reach the egg more easily.

See the discharge on those days as a train on which the sperm cells can hitch a ride, all the way to the egg cell. But since you can't get pregnant for the entire month, this cervical mucus changes after your ovulation.

CERVICAL MUCUS



WINTER

Little or no discharge during menstruation



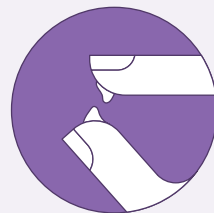
SPRING

After your menstruation, when estrogen increases, your cervical mucus can be creamy, milky and sticky



SUMMER

During your ovulation, your cervical mucus is very stretchy and transparent



AUTUMN

Before your period, your cervical mucus may be less, yellowish, granular and a bit thicker again

- **During your menstruation.**
During your menstruation, you have less estrogen and progesterone. Less estrogen means less discharge. During this period, you have little or no discharge. If you already had discharge, you wouldn't be able to see it now because of the bleeding.
- **After your period.**
Shortly after your period, you may observe little to no cervical mucus. Maybe your vulva also feels dry. As your estrogen increases, you will notice clearer cervical mucus: thick, sticky, milky, creamy or white. When it has dried, you will see a grainy layer in your underwear.
- **Around and during your ovulation.**
You are about to ovulate and now see a clear difference in your discharge. Your vulva may feel wetter and you may notice stretchy and/or transparent cervical mucus on the toilet paper or in your underwear. It looks a bit like raw egg white. You also have a lot of discharge and it may even leak from your vagina.
- **Before your menstruation.**
After your ovulation, estrogen will decrease again and progesterone will increase. This will result in a decrease in the quality and quantity of mucus. Your cervical mucus becomes thick, sticky, white, yellowish or grainy again, and can even be absent on some days.

What do you need to measure your ovulation?

Not much! First and foremost a **thermometer**, but one with two decimal places after the comma (so for example 37.52 °C). A regular thermometer is therefore not sufficient. And furthermore, **an app** as a tool to collect all the data (or you can write it down in a notebook, that's also possible). These are my favorite apps:

- **Natural Cycles.** This app is the only one officially approved by the American Food and Drug Administration (FDA) as a contraceptive app. Natural Cycles measures your fertility based on your basal body temperature. The app claims to be 99 percent reliable if you use it perfectly. It predicts your ovulation and menstruation. The data becomes more accurate as you add more information. The ovulation does not always occur in the middle of your cycle, which means you can still get pregnant at a time when you least expected it. The accuracy of the app increases as you record more cycles. You don't have the discipline to measure your temperature daily? Natural Cycles also has a partnership with Oura. A ring measures your temperature, keeps track of it, and sends it to the contraceptive app.
- **Flo.** This app predicts your ovulation and fertile days based on your cycle data. These are data that you enter yourself, such as the length of your past menstrual cycles and certain symptoms such as cramps or mood swings.
- **Clue.** Thanks to this app, you can learn a lot about your body. If you haven't paid attention during sex education classes, this is perfect for you. Clue provides you with both menstrual and PMS predictions based on the information you enter. All your data is neatly stored in a clear overview that helps you easily analyze and view trends. Just like Flo, the app provides an indication of your fertile days.

Attention! It is not recommended to use Flo and Clue as a reliable form of contraception. They remain apps that make *predictions* based on an algorithm of when you ovulate and therefore are fertile. They do not require you to monitor your basic body temperature, making them less reliable. They are useful for getting to know your cycle. They provide a clear overview of when your menstruation starts, how long it lasts, and even how heavy it is on different days, along with other symptoms.

Keep track of your temperature for at least one to three months. This way you can recognize patterns and better understand when your ovulation is approaching. **Check your uterine or cervical mucus daily** to know how it looks during each phase. Check for yourself every day whether there is mucus by your vaginal entrance, in your underwear or on your toilet paper.

CAN YOU MENSTRUATE WITHOUT OVULATING?

How can you know that you have had an ovulation? If a woman tracks her basal body temperature daily and there is no slight increase in her cycle, it may indicate that she has not ovulated. If there is no elastic cervical mucus, it can also indicate a lack of ovulation. When no egg is released from your ovary during your menstrual cycle, we refer to this as anovulation. However, you can have bleeding without a preceding ovulation. In this case, it is usually breakthrough bleeding.

Anovulation is common during certain stages of a woman's reproductive life, such as in girls who have just started menstruating. In the first year after the first menstruation, it is not uncommon for girls to have anovulatory cycles.

It also often occurs in women approaching menopause. Women between the ages of forty and fifty are more likely to experience a hormonal shift, which can lead to more frequent anovulation.

It is also possible to have anovulatory cycles while you are fertile, and there are many reasons for this. Below are some possible causes. If you are concerned about having anovulatory cycles, it is best to consult your doctor.

- Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS). This refers to a condition in which a hormonal imbalance causes small cysts or underdeveloped egg-shaped follicles in the ovaries. It can also cause irregular menstruation, excessive body hair, oily skin, weight gain, depression and infertility. Some women may have PCOS without experiencing these symptoms and may not know they have the condition until they try to get pregnant. If you have been diagnosed with PCOS, ovulation tests can give misleading results, because women with PCOS can have a high LH concentration throughout their entire cycle. Ovulation tests determine your fertile days by measuring the increase in LH in your urine. Therefore, I have never used it to confirm my ovulation.

TESTIMONY

Natasha Casteleyn

(JEWELRY DESIGNER NIMZU)

In 2019, after intense years of carrying and giving birth to two children and starting my own business, my body called out that it was enough. I bled for months on end and the only 'solution' I got from the primary care physician and gynecologist was a prescription for the pill. I decided to take matters into my own hands and start tracking my cycle to investigate how it also affected my intense emotions. I began to recognize patterns that had been a blind spot both personally and professionally.

I am naturally very enthusiastic and a 'go-getter'. I would often come up with ideas for events or sales strategies, and in my impatience (hello, Aries) I would systematically plan their execution barely two weeks later. It started to become noticeable to me that at the moment of execution, my energy was extremely low and I actually wanted nothing more than to crawl under my duvet. Often this would lead to self-criticism and I would be disappointed in myself. By tracking my cycle, I began to see that these phases coincided with my cycle and started taking them into account.

If I have all sorts of creative ideas now (often from day 4 to day 11), I plan their execution a month later to be at that same energy level. Often, I even let an extra cycle pass to see if the enthusiasm remains and to determine if it wasn't just a 'follicular inspiration' and perhaps not such a good business idea after all. That has made me much less reluctant to attend events or have contact moments with my clients.

Those observant among you will see that I am very active on Instagram (@nimzu_) during the first ten days of my cycle. That's when I'm very good at clearly communicating my message. Two weeks later, I am much quieter and therefore you see me less often. In the past, I used to force myself to be visible online all the time, but because the energy wasn't right, it often didn't have the same effect. I am now letting go of that and focusing more on the work behind the scenes of my business during the last ten days of my cycle. Then I plan, for example, technical settings that can optimize sales. Or I work on administrative tasks that are often put aside during the follicular phase.

A recurring pattern that I have since identified is that towards the end of my cycle my critical voice emerges. 'What are you actually telling people online? Who cares about any of this? Is that relevant?' That doesn't always make it easy. Meanwhile, I allow that little voice, but don't give it too much attention. I know that I will be able to communicate confidently from my heart again a week later, regardless of how it is received by others.

In short, this is how I do it:

- WINTER: I try to incorporate enough moments of rest. If possible, I avoid appointments with clients, and make more time for swimming, going for a coffee, journaling and being alone.
- SPRING: I usually feel a vibrant energy. In spring, I have to restrain myself from being too loud and intense towards my team. I am full of energy and ideas. Often, I also want to change a pre-made schedule. Fortunately, I recognize that by now and I can openly discuss and put it into perspective with humor with my team.
- SUMMER: I am less focused on my business and feel that I want to connect more with my family. I want to go to the sauna, lie on the couch with the kids, romp and play together. My physical senses are sharper and the businesswoman is momentarily quieter.
- AUTUMN: the energy decreases, both mentally and physically. I turn inward a bit more. I reflect on the decisions and actions we took in the past weeks. I am more analytical. The critical voice gets louder. Just before I get my period, I often have a 'no bullshit day'. Certain things come to the surface that I have covered with the cloak of love during the previous phases. Those are the days when I express things that have been on my mind for a while: often less influenced by emotions, but more down-to-business and to-the-point.

The phrase that echoes throughout my entire cycle is: *'Don't let your summer woman be in charge of your agenda.'*