

Find the Words

“How do I explain what I’m experiencing?”

Knowing how your body works is one thing. Explaining what’s happening in it, clearly enough that someone else understands, is another. This edition is about the words in between.

01 LEARN

02 NOTICE

03 DESCRIBE

04 ASK

About 30 minutes to read For ages 12+

“cramping”



every month

“sharp, on the left”

EDITION 02 · FIND THE WORDS

FROM THE ARCHIVE

This edition marks the first big shift in how Aletheia thought about health education. Young people told us they understood their bodies better after the first packs, but still froze in the GP’s office, or said “I just feel off” and watched the conversation move on. We realised knowledge needed language. This is where Voice Packs started becoming more than information sheets.

01 BEFORE WE BEGIN

“I just feel off.”

You know something’s not right. But when someone asks what’s wrong, the words don’t come. You say “it hurts” or “I’m just tired”, and it sounds smaller than it feels.

That isn’t because your experience is small. It’s because nobody taught you the words for it. Doctors work with information: where, when, how bad, how often. The clearer the information, the easier it is for them, and for you, to work out what’s going on.

Your experience doesn’t need to be dramatic to be real. It needs to be described.

01 LEARN

Health words

The plain meaning of words you’ll hear, and words worth knowing.

02 NOTICE

Your normal

What’s usual for you, so you can spot a change.

03 DESCRIBE

The five questions

What, where, when, how much, and what changes it.

04 ASK

At the GP

Preparing, and the questions you’re allowed to ask.



New here?

This edition builds on **Edition 01: Know Your Body**, which covers anatomy, puberty and the menstrual cycle. You don’t need to read it first, but it helps.

“We used nicknames for everything. ‘The red days,’ ‘the bad belly,’ ‘the change.’ But no one ever taught me words like ovary or cervix. When I went to the doctor in Australia, I couldn’t even explain what hurt, because I didn’t know the terms.”

33, Hindu mother

“In Somali, we just say ‘caado’ for period. But there’s no separate word for discharge. So when I noticed stuff in my underwear, I thought something was wrong with me. No one told me that sometimes it’s healthy.”

16, Somali high school student

“I was using a translator app to help my mum understand my doctor’s notes about PCOS. But when I typed in ‘ovulation,’ it just spat out something like ‘egg time.’ My mum laughed, and then she brushed it off. How do you explain something serious when the word sounds like a joke?”

21, Pakistani–Australian university student

Shared with Aletheia and first published on our blog in **Words we don’t translate**. Names removed.

02 LEARN Health words, without the jargon

Some words come up in almost every appointment. Knowing them means you can follow what's being said, and use them yourself.

Symptom

WHAT IT IS

Something you notice that isn't usual for you: pain, tiredness, a change in bleeding, a feeling that won't shift.

Acute

WHAT IT IS

Came on recently or suddenly. It doesn't mean severe.

Chronic

WHAT IT IS

Has lasted a long time, usually three months or more, or keeps coming back. It doesn't mean it's serious or can't be helped.

Intermittent

WHAT IT IS

Comes and goes, rather than being there all the time.

Referred pain

WHAT IT IS

Pain you feel in one place that comes from somewhere else. Period pain often spreads to the lower back and thighs.

Fatigue

WHAT IT IS

Exhaustion that doesn't go away with rest. Different from being tired after a late night.

Dysmenorrhoea

dis-men-or-REE-a

WHAT IT IS

The medical word for period pain. Primary means there's no other condition causing it; secondary means there is.

Heavy menstrual bleeding

WHAT IT IS

Bleeding that's heavy enough to affect your day: changing a pad or tampon every one to two hours, flooding, or clots bigger than a 50-cent coin.

Irregular

WHAT IT IS

Cycles that change a lot in length from one to the next, or are under 21 or over 45 days.

Words you might hear, and why it helps to know them

You don't need to diagnose yourself. But knowing that some common conditions exist, and what they tend to look like, helps you recognise when something might be worth asking about.

Endometriosis

en-doh-mee-tree-OH-sis

WHAT IT IS

Tissue similar to the lining of the uterus grows outside it, causing inflammation and pain. About 1 in 7 people assigned female at birth in Australia are diagnosed by their late 40s.

WHAT IT CAN FEEL LIKE

Period pain that stops you doing things, pain that gets worse over time, pain with bowel movements or weeing during your period, pain between periods.

YOU CAN SAY

“ My period pain stops me going to school.

“ It's getting worse each year.

Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)

pol-ee-SIS-tik

WHAT IT IS

A common hormonal condition, affecting about 8–13% of women of reproductive age. Despite the name, it isn't about cysts.

WHAT IT CAN FEEL LIKE

Irregular or missing periods, acne, extra hair on the face or body, or hair thinning on the head.

UPDATED

Archive note: in 2026 this condition was renamed polyendocrine metabolic ovarian syndrome (PMOS). The current Voice Pack uses the new name.

YOU CAN SAY

“ My periods are often months apart.

“ I've had acne and irregular periods together for a while.

Iron deficiency

WHAT IT IS

Not having enough iron, often because of heavy periods. It can lead to anaemia (low red blood cells).

WHAT IT CAN FEEL LIKE

Tiredness that doesn't lift, feeling breathless or dizzy, pale skin, finding it hard to concentrate.

YOU CAN SAY

“ I've been exhausted and my periods are heavy. Could we check my iron?

Premenstrual syndrome (PMS)

WHAT IT IS

Physical and emotional changes in the days before a period: bloating, sore breasts, irritability, low mood. PMDD is a more severe form.

WHAT IT CAN FEEL LIKE

A predictable dip in mood or energy that lifts once your period starts.

YOU CAN SAY

“ The week before my period, my mood drops a lot, every month.

03 NOTICE Know your normal

Doctors often ask “Is this new?” or “Is this different for you?” To answer, you need a sense of your own baseline: what’s usual for your body.

Your baseline includes

- How long your cycle usually is, and how many days you bleed
- How heavy a normal day is for you
- Your usual energy, sleep and appetite
- How you usually feel emotionally across a month
- Any pain you get regularly, and how bad it usually is

Signs of a change worth noticing

- Something new that wasn’t there before
- Something that’s getting worse over time
- Something that’s stopping you doing things you normally do
- Something that keeps coming back in a pattern
- Something that other people have started noticing too

“Common” and “normal for you” aren’t the same thing. Lots of people get period pain. That doesn’t mean yours should stop you living your life.

REFLECT

What’s your normal?

1. How long is your cycle usually, roughly?
2. On your heaviest day, how often do you change a pad, tampon or cup?
3. What does a ‘normal’ energy day feel like for you?
4. Is there anything that’s changed in the last few months?

04 DESCRIBE Describe it: the five questions

Almost any symptom becomes clearer when you answer five questions. You don't have to answer them perfectly. Even two or three makes a big difference.

ASK YOURSELF	WHAT IT MEANS	EXAMPLE
1. What does it feel like?	The type of feeling	"A dull ache that turns sharp"
2. Where is it?	The exact place, and whether it spreads	"Low tummy, left side, spreads to my back"
3. When is it?	When it started, when it happens, how long it lasts	"Days 1–2 of my period, for about a year"
4. How much?	How strong, and what it stops you doing	"Usually a 6. I miss school on the first day"
5. What changes it?	What makes it better or worse	"Heat helps a bit. Moving makes it worse"

1 • What does it feel like? Words to try

Cramping

Squeezing or tightening, coming in waves.

Aching / dull

A heavy, constant, low-level pain.

Sharp / stabbing

Sudden, intense, in one spot.

Burning

Hot or stinging, like a burn.

Throbbing

Pulsing, like a heartbeat.

Pressure

Heavy, pushing or dragging down.

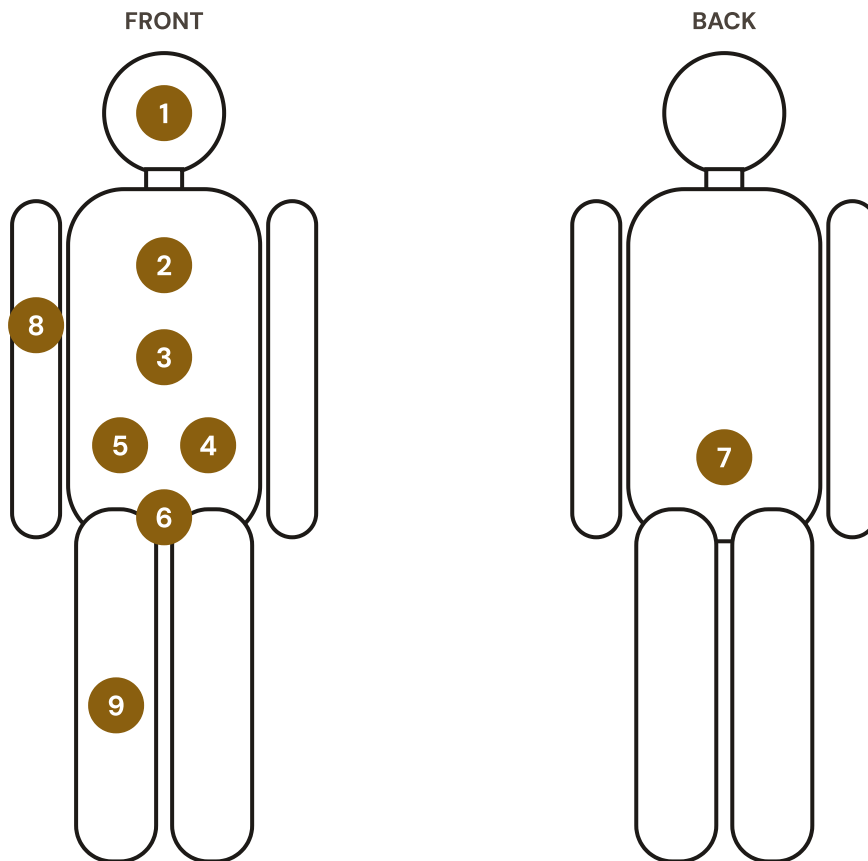
Shooting

Travels quickly down a leg or into your back.

Tender

Sore when touched or pressed.

2 · Where is it? Use the map



1 · head

2 · chest

3 · upper tummy

4 · lower tummy, your left

5 · lower tummy, your right

6 · pelvis

7 · lower back

8 · arms and joints

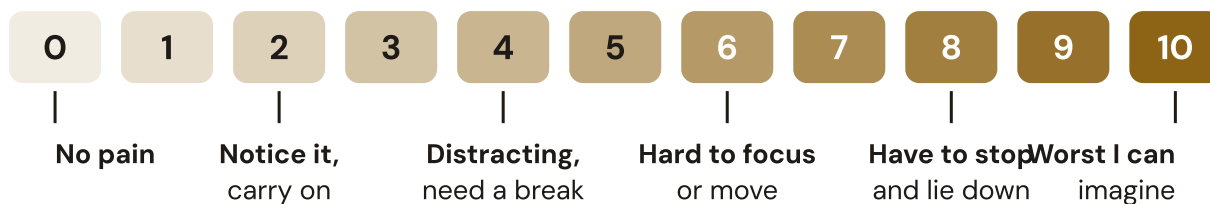
9 · legs

On the front view, your left side is on the right of the picture.

Say the zone and the side: “zone 4 and my lower back” is much clearer than “my stomach”.

4 · How much? Rate what it stops you doing

Rate what the pain stops you doing, not just how it feels.



Give your usual number AND your worst: "Usually 4, at worst 8."

Numbers mean different things to different people. Pairing your number with what it stops you doing makes it clear.

Words for how you're feeling inside

Mental and emotional symptoms need words too. "Stressed" and "sad" cover a lot. Try being more specific.

Instead of "stressed"

- On edge, can't switch off
- Overwhelmed by small things
- Heart racing, can't catch my breath
- Worrying most of the day

Instead of "sad"

- Flat, like nothing matters
- Numb, or disconnected
- Crying more than usual
- Not enjoying things I used to

Instead of "tired"

- Exhausted even after sleeping
- Brain fog, can't concentrate
- Everything takes more effort
- Sleeping much more, or much less

AND TO SAY HOW LONG

“ Most days for the last two months.

“ Every month, in the week before my period.

“ It started after [something that happened] and hasn’t gone away.

Track it: patterns are information

	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	D6	D7	D8	D9	D10	D11	D12	D13	D14
Bleeding	●●●	●●●	●●	●	●									
Pain (0–10)	7	8	5	3	1								2	3
Missed school / plans	✓	✓												
Mood	low	low										low	low	
Energy	low	low	low											low

Bleeding: ● light ●● medium ●●● heavy. Low = noticeably lower than your usual.

Two or three months of tracking often shows a pattern you can’t see day to day. A notes app, a period app or the Aletheia Self-Advocacy Journal all work.

05 ASK Prepare, then ask

A GP appointment is often 10 to 15 minutes. Five minutes of preparing beforehand means you use that time well.

Before the appointment

- ☐ Write your main concern in one sentence
- ☐ Answer the five questions for it
- ☐ Bring your tracker, or a few notes on your phone
- ☐ List any medicines or supplements you take
- ☐ Write down 2–3 questions
- ☐ Ask for a longer appointment if you have more than one thing

Questions you're allowed to ask

- What could be causing this?
- Is this something I should keep an eye on?
- Are there tests that could help?
- What can I do to feel better in the meantime?
- What should make me come back sooner?
- Can you write that down for me?
- Could you explain that another way?

Booking the appointment

RECEPTIONIST

What's the appointment for?

YOU

I've been having painful periods and I'd like to talk to a GP about it.

RECEPTIONIST

No problem. Do you need a standard or a long appointment?

YOU

Could I have a long one? I have a few things to go through.

You don't have to give the receptionist details. "A private health concern" is enough.

Opening the appointment

CLINICIAN

What brings you in today?

YOU

I've had period pain for about a year that's getting worse. It's sharp and cramping, low on my left side and into my back. It's usually a 6, and on the first day it's an 8, so I miss school.

YOU

Heat helps a bit, but not enough. I brought my tracker.

That's thirty seconds, and it answers most of the questions the GP would otherwise need to ask.

MAYA, ONE YEAR LATER

From “it hurts” to a clear description

Maya's cramps have got worse. Last time she told a school nurse “my stomach hurts on my period”, she was given a heat pack and sent back to class.

This time she tracks two cycles. She notes where the pain is (low, mostly left, into her back), how long it lasts (the first two days), how strong it is (usually a 6, an 8 on day one) and what it stops (she's missed four school days this term).

At the GP she reads from her notes. The GP asks more questions, suggests a plan to try for three months, and asks her to come back with her tracker if it doesn't help.

Maya is fictional. Her story continues in Edition 03.

06 ASK Your words

The best words are the ones you'll actually say. Use this space to find yours.

REFLECT

Write it in your words

1. Something I've been noticing is...
2. It feels like...
3. It's been happening since...
4. It stops me from...
5. What I'd like to find out is...



If the words still won't come

It's fine to hand your notes to the GP, or to say "I've written it down, can I read it to you?" Writing it first is not a weakness. It's preparation.

WHERE THIS IDEA WENT NEXT

From finding words to the tools we use now

Language became central to Aletheia. It shaped the Self-Advocacy Journal (with its symptom tracker) and our workshops, and it's why we build resources in more than one language.

Self-Advocacy Journal & Health Navigator

Track symptoms, prepare for appointments

Youth Workshops

"The Words for What You Feel" and more

Multilingual Resources

Health words in more languages

Next: Archive Edition 03

Clear words, and still not being heard

Health education, not medical advice. This pack explains general health information so you can understand your body and talk about it. It cannot diagnose you. If you're worried about your health, speak to a doctor, nurse or other health professional. **In an emergency, call 000.**

Emergency • 000

If you or someone else is in danger or needs urgent medical help.

Kids Helpline • 1800 55

1800

Free, 24/7 phone and webchat, ages 5–25.

Lifeline • 13 11 14

24/7 crisis support. Text 0477 13 11 14.

headspace •

headspace.org.au

Free or low-cost support, ages 12–25.

► Sources and fact-checking (8)

Written and designed by The Aletheia Project resource development team. Scenarios are fictional. We acknowledge the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the Kulin Nation, where Aletheia was founded. Sovereignty was never ceded.