

The female menstrual cycle: the importance of education



What's normal, what isn't and what should be; at various life stages and for all women

Menstruation is a normal and healthy part of life for most women. Yet, as normal as it is, it's still [stigmatised around the world](#), leading to damaging misconceptions and causing girls to miss out on normal childhood experiences and activities. For example, [70% of girls in Afghanistan don't bathe when menstruating](#), for fear of becoming infertile. If anyone reading this thinks that the UK is far more advanced and stigma-free, [they'd be sadly mistaken](#). Nearly half of girls (48%) in the UK feel embarrassed by their period. A similar percentage (49%) have missed an entire day of school because of their period. And two fifths (40%) have had to use rolled up toilet paper because they cannot afford proper sanitary products.

The figures are truly shocking. Real-world education represents only part of the solution, but it's an important part. And it's here that we focus for the purpose of this article.

Periods are simply a fact of life

What we do know for sure – and for the majority of the female population of reproductive age – is that any or [all of the following](#) are perfectly normal at some time or another: pain, bloating, fatigue and irritability, acne, headache, breast tenderness and lower back pain.

To quote American singer-songwriter Dolly Parton, 'Sometimes it's hard to be a woman! But rather than bemoan the 'curse' of periods or feel belittled or ignored when every change of mood is put down to 'time of the month'...let's encourage women to instead stand proud; to consider what periods are all about and what the female body was built to do - namely the creation of life. Although we of course acknowledge that not every woman's body affords this. Indeed also, not every woman wants this.

Periods – in the main – shouldn't cause life, school or work to be temporarily put on hold. They shouldn't cause anyone to miss out on experiences or activities. And no-one should be made to feel like it's a taboo subject.

On that note, let's examine what's typically normal and what isn't at different life stages.

Under 25s

Most girls start their periods when they're about 12. But they can start as early as age 8. A delay in starting periods can be due to being underweight, doing lots of exercise and hormone imbalances. But a delay shouldn't be considered a cause for concern and most girls will be having regular periods by age 16 to 18.

Back to basics: What is a period?

A [period](#) is the part of the menstrual cycle when a woman bleeds from her vagina for a few days. For most women this happens every 28 days of so. But it's common for periods to be more or less frequent than this, ranging from day 21 to day 40 of their menstrual cycle.

A period can last between 3 and 8 days, but it will usually last for about 5 days. The bleeding tends to be heaviest in the first 2 days. On average, women lose between 30 - 40ml (5 to 12 teaspoons) of blood during their period, although some bleed more heavily than this.

What sanitary products are available?

Sanitary products are designed to soak up the blood released during a period. The main types are sanitary pads and tampons. They come in various sizes and whether you use one or the other, or combine the two, is down to personal choice.

There are also lots of environmentally friendly options available now. Traditional products contain plastics, which don't decompose. Their damage to the environment is [well documented](#).

Menstrual cups represent an alternative to sanitary pads and tampons. These are made of silicone and you put it inside your vagina. They collect the blood rather than absorb it and can be washed out and used again.

What to watch out for

Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS)

This is a [common condition](#) that affects the way in which a woman's ovaries work, the signs and symptoms of which will usually become apparent during late teens or early 20s.

Not all women with PCOS will have all of the symptoms and each symptom can vary from mild to severe. These include:

- Irregular periods or no periods at all
- Difficulty getting pregnant (because of irregular ovulation or failure to ovulate)
- Excessive hair growth (hirsutism) – usually on the face, chest, back or buttocks
- Weight gain
- Thinning hair and hair loss from the head
- Oily skin or acne

Those with PCOS can develop long-term health conditions such as:

- Diabetes
- High Blood Pressure
- Cancer
- Snoring and daytime drowsiness
- Mood swings and depression

There are ways to reduce these long-term health effects such as leading a healthy lifestyle (eating a healthy balanced diet and exercising regularly) and taking regularly health checks:

- **Diabetes:** Women with PCOS over the age of 40 should be offered a blood sugar test once a year to check for signs of diabetes. If your BMI is 30 or over or you have a family history of diabetes, you may be offered testing for diabetes earlier than age 40.
- **Cancer of the womb:** If you have not had a period for a long time (over 4 months) or have irregular bleeding, it is advisable to see your doctor. You may be offered a referral for further tests that may include an ultrasound scan of your womb (uterus) or treatment to make you have a period if they are very irregular.

- **High blood pressure:** Discuss with your doctor how often you should have your blood pressure checked and whether you should have blood tests to check your cholesterol levels.
- **Depression and psychological problems:** You can be referred to a counsellor or trained specialist if necessary.

Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS)

This is a [rare but life-threatening condition](#) caused by bacteria getting into the body and releasing harmful toxins. It's often associated with tampon use in young women, but it can affect anyone of any age – including men and children.

Symptoms include:

- A high temperature
- Flu-like symptoms, such as headache, feeling cold, feeling tired or exhausted, an aching body, a sore throat and a cough
- Feeling and being sick
- Diarrhoea
- A widespread sunburn-like rash
- Lips, tongue and the whites of the eyes turning a bright red
- Dizziness or fainting
- Difficulty breathing
- Confusion

Fact or fiction?

Can you use a tampon at any age?

Any girl can use a tampon. And contrary to some myths, it does not cause a girl to lose her virginity (only having sex can do that). Lots of girls who are sporty or simply active choose to use tampons as it can just make life easier to not be wearing a sanitary towel, which can sometimes feel a little bulky depending on how heavy your periods are.

Age 25 – 45

As women get older, many experience issues relating to their menstrual cycles. These include heavy periods and pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS).

Heavy menstrual bleeding

[This can be a distressing problem](#) and is one of the most common reasons for women to visit their GP. Bleeding is considered abnormal when more than 80ml is lost. This amount puts women at risk of developing anaemia. 1 in 3 women describe their period as heavy and 1 in 20 women consult their GP every year about this problem.

In more than half of cases it has no obvious cause. However, it is sometimes related to the presence of organic disease, such as Fibroids (benign enlargements of muscle in the wall of the womb) or Endometriosis (misplaced lining of the womb).

It's worth noting that oral contraceptive pills can often make periods lighter. So if you stop taking the pill, your periods may appear to become heavier, when in fact they're just returning to normal levels.

PMS (pre-menstrual syndrome)

This is [the name for the symptoms women can experience](#) in the weeks before their period. Most women have PMS at some point. And for most, the symptoms, which can vary from month to month, are manageable and life goes on uninterrupted. However, where daily life is impacted, it would be well worth seeking help from your GP.

One of the most common symptoms is mood swings. Fluctuations in hormone levels before, during or after your menstrual cycle can cause irritability, upset and anxiety.

Other common symptoms include: tiredness or trouble sleeping; bloating or tummy pain; headaches, spotty skin; changes in appetite and sex drive.

Making lifestyle changes can often help improve your symptoms; from eating a healthy, balanced diet and exercising regularly to taking herbal supplements. Also taking pain killers, where needed, such as ibuprofen or paracetamol.

Fact or fiction?

Can you still get pregnant when you're on your period?

Yes, contrary to popular belief, [you can get pregnant if you have sex while you're on your period](#). Although it's more unlikely, it's not impossible. This is because sperm can survive in the body for up to five or six days.

Age 45+

Your periods will continue until you reach the menopause, which usually happens when you are in your late 40s to mid 50s. In the UK, the average age of menopause is 51. Your periods may start to become less frequent over a few months or years before stopping altogether.

The common signs of periods ending ([menopause](#)) include:

- Hot flushes
- Night sweats
- Vaginal dryness and discomfort during sex
- Difficulty sleeping
- Reduced sex drive (libido)
- Problems with memory and concentration

Low mood, anxiety

Just as common as the physical issues listed above are the less spoken about side effects related to mental health, from irritability, sadness, lack of motivation, anxiety and even aggressiveness to the lack of mental clarity and inability to focus, known as 'brain fog' – all of which are caused by a fluctuation of the hormones released by the ovaries in perimenopause, and consistently low hormone levels in menopause.

Much like constant PMS, these effects can cause emotional strain. And if you have a pre-existing mental health problem – such as depression or bipolar disorder – it's possible that the effects of menopause could cause a relapse or change to your mental health.

Fact or fiction?

Is it true that social support helps women live longer?

It feels good to vent or laugh with friends during tough parts of life. But research suggests it can increase longevity in post-menopausal women too.

[A study has shown](#) that women aged 50 – 79 who believed they had more social support were less likely to die during the 10+ years of the study; 20% less likely in fact, than those reporting very low levels of social support. Perceived social support included whether a person believed they could get emotional support, advice, or just company from others to do fun things with; all of which can help reduce stress.

Don't suffer in silence... it's often normal

If you have concerns or are experiencing any of the symptoms detailed, speak with your GP. For many, mental wellbeing is just as important as the physical symptoms – talking to friends, family, a teacher or colleague can help. WPA's Health & Wellbeing Helpline (EAP provider) can also assist.

Other sources

- BBC News, [Call for investigation of menstrual changes after Covid jabs](#), September 2021
- Medicines & Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, [Coronavirus vaccine – weekly summary of yellow card reporting](#), September 2021
- Medical News Today, [Long Covid and periods: The unspoken impact on female well-being](#), Feb 2021

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