



Student Wellbeing Resource

Menstruation

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Menstruation

Overview

Menstruation is a vital sign. Like blood pressure, resting heart rate or temperature, it can indicate good health or illness. Periods are an ordinary biological function that are part of the reproductive cycle.

Due to a long history of taboos and stigmas around attitudes to reproductive health in general and periods in particular, this topic can produce some anxiety for teachers, parents, carers and young people. Some of this comes from historical and cultural taboos that are passed down from one generation to the next, but for the past century or so media advertising has also played an influential role.

Advertising messages can make their way into schools in the form of leaflets and free lesson materials from major multinational corporations that manufacture and sell disposable menstrual products. By not questioning the messages we have received or not teaching young people how to do so, teachers, parents and carers can accidentally transmit the message that periods are bad or should be kept secret. It is important to ensure that we “catch up” on our own learning so we can pass on the most valuable, evidenced-based, accurate information to young people in a way that dispels myths and actively challenges taboos.

Encouraging an atmosphere where young people of all genders can speak freely about periods supports a better overall attitude to the changes of puberty as well as a positive sense of wellbeing. It can lead to better focus in the classroom and more open conversations with parents and carers, and it may also help with early diagnosis of STIs, womb-related cancers and other illnesses. A positive attitude around menstruation helps to create an atmosphere in which young people will feel more supported to seek medical help for reproductive health-related medical conditions such as endometriosis.

It is important to remember that while most people who menstruate are girls and women, not all women do for medical or physiological reasons, and some people who menstruate may be trans, non-binary or intersex.

Taboos & Myths

In the past, menstruation management in western culture was practical and, while not necessarily as convenient as today, did not carry the negative connotations that have built up over the past hundred years or so. While historic taboos evolved from religious customs, superstitions and inaccurate medical beliefs, the 20th century saw a focus on advertising influencing most of the public discourse around menstruation. Companies selling disposable menstrual products found it lucrative to send a representative into schools, offer schools free samples, and even provide mothers, teachers and school nurses with branded educational booklets. This still goes on today, and in many schools across the country one can still find these materials. Market research companies issue reports that recommend companies continue doing this to gain loyal customers, and experts reviewing or vetting these resources frequently find them lacking valuable information.

References

¹ https://www.city.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/282388/FGM-statistics-final-report-21-07-15-released-text.pdf

² *ibid*

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fgm-protection-orders-factsheet>

Menstruation

Biology Glossary

Cervix The lower part of the uterus that contains the opening to the vagina.

Clitoris Organ providing sexual pleasure, part of which is visible just inside the top of the labia.

Discharge Fluid produced by glands in the cervix or vagina that indicate different states of health, eg fertility, arousal, infection. Most discharge is healthy and normal. Some kinds can indicate an infection. Healthy discharge shouldn't be itchy or painful, but unhealthy discharge can be (although some infections may go unnoticed because they have no symptoms).

Endometrium The blood and tissue that line the uterus.

Fallopian tubes The tubes that eggs travel along from the ovaries to the uterus.

Hormones Chemicals in the body that control various biological functions.

Labia The inner and outer folds of the vulva.

Luteinising hormone The hormone that triggers ovulation.

Menarche When someone begins their very first menstrual cycle.

Menopause The time in life when menstrual cycles end, around age 50 - 55.

Menstrual cycle The menstrual cycle is everything from preparing for ovulation to menstruation and round again.

Menstruation When the uterus sheds its lining, resulting in bleeding from the vagina.

Menstruator A person who menstruates.

Oestrogen The hormone that triggers egg maturation.

Ovaries The organs that store and mature eggs inside the body.

Ovulation When an egg is released from the ovaries.

Ovum An egg cell which, if fertilised by sperm, can implant into the uterine wall, leading to pregnancy.

Premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD) Severe and debilitating physical and emotional symptoms experienced before or at the start of each cycle.

Premenstrual tension (PMT) Minor to moderate physical and emotional symptoms experienced in the run-up to and sometimes during the start of each cycle.

Progesterone The hormone responsible for the build-up of the uterine lining.

Puberty The time at which young people's bodies change, when they mature into young adults and become able to reproduce.

Toxic shock syndrome (TSS) A very serious bacterial infection that studies have linked to tampon use.

Uterus An organ inside the body that grows a lining to protect an egg each month. If the egg is fertilised it implants into the wall of the uterus at the start of pregnancy.

Vagina Internal passage to the uterus.

Vulva External genitalia consisting of the clitoris and labia – not to be confused with the vagina.

Key Facts

- 1 in 4 young people don't learn about menstruation in school lessons before they reach puberty. ¹
- Young women aged between 18-24 are four times less likely to go to a doctor about a sexual health issue than women aged between 55-64. ²
- A quarter of young women avoided their doctor purely because they didn't know what words to use, while 44% did so out of a reluctance to discuss sexual health issues. ²
- 65% of women say they would feel uncomfortable carrying disposable menstrual products openly to the toilet, but only 14% of men said they would feel uncomfortable seeing someone carrying a menstrual product to the toilet. ³
- In a report by the Bolton NHS Foundation Trust in 2010, "menstruation problems" were the fifth most common reason given for school absence. ⁴
- The average menstruator will use 11,000 menstrual products in their menovulatory lifetime, and 4.3 billion disposable menstrual products are used per year in the UK. ⁵

References

¹ Sex Education Forum Prepared for Puberty Project (NCB 2016) www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/policy-campaigns/the-puberty-issue.aspx

² Ovarian Cancer Action Survey, 2015 www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-health/11807083/Ovarian-cancer-Sex-vagina-and-orgasm-feats-put-women-off-seeing-GP.html?placement=CB2

³ WaterAid Survey, 2017 www.wateraid.org/uk/media/prudish-about-periods-new-survey-reveals-nations-awkwardness-around-periods-as-wateraid

⁴ Davies, J., & Hindley, D. (2010). Managing frequent medical absences from school. Archives of Disease in Childhood. <https://doi.org/10.1136/adc.2009.176651>

⁵ Menstruation and Sanpro/Femcare Market Facts and Fig's, AHPMA www.ahpma.co.uk/docs/Menstruation%20Facts%20and%20Figs.pdf

Menstruation Management

There are four types of menstrual products: internal, external, disposable and reusable.

Most people are familiar with disposable menstrual products like pads, tampons and panty liners. These are used once and thrown away. There are many different brands, varieties and material variations, and it may take time to find one that is the right price and the right design for each menstruator. Companies work hard to advertise these products as part of a very profitable industry.

Reusable menstrual products are gaining popularity because they are good for the environment and for personal budgets. These include menstrual cups, which are inserted into the vagina to collect blood. They are designed to be taken out, rinsed or wiped with loo roll and reinserted. Cloth pads are also reusable and are often familiar to those who use cloth nappies. They can be bought or homemade. Period pants are underwear with a built-in absorbent fabric layer – they absorb a light flow of blood and then can be washed and worn again.

Internal menstrual products, such as tampons and menstrual cups, are used inside the vagina.

External menstrual products, such as disposable pads, cloth pads and period pants, are worn outside the body.

Best Practice

A big shift in how we currently approach the topic of menstruation is needed so that young people can focus on their schoolwork, exams and activities rather than worrying about menstruation management.

Reflect on your own attitudes to menstruation and when and how they may have formed. Develop your own knowledge so that, if approached, you can confidently support young people with their menstruation queries.

Carry out an audit of your school or organisation to ensure that menstruation management is made easy and practical.

Ensure that toilets accommodate people who menstruate by providing small pedal bins (including in the men's, unisex and disabled toilets) and that there is soap, hot water and drying facilities. In schools, allow pupils to go to the toilet when needed, and ensure that toilets are unlocked at all times.

Provide a range of free menstrual products that are easily accessible. Do not use one brand or promote free samples or lessons with logos – this can unduly influence young people and may promote advertising tactics that use shame and secrecy.

Ensure menstrual products are in exam hall toilets and that posters notifying pupils of this are clearly displayed.

Try not to make assumptions about who has periods. Whether for physiological, gender identity, trauma or medical reasons, be sensitive to individuals. For trans and non-binary-identifying young people (who may not have indicated their gender identity to all staff), gender-neutral language can be critical to ensuring they receive valuable information that does not exclude.

When teaching about or providing menstruation management, show examples of a range of several different brands, styles and types of reusable and disposable menstrual products.

Use teachable moments to remove any sense of secrecy around menstruation. Be alert for off-the-cuff opportunities and avoid expressing disgust, as that creates a sense of shame about periods. How you handle these moments sets the tone – humour, neutrality and matter-of-factness work well – and ignoring these incidents can speak volumes.

Make menstruation education into an ongoing conversation rather than a “big talk”.

Resources

A resource for gauging your own or young people's attitudes to menstruation <https://periodpositive.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/how-periodpositive-are-you.jpg>

A short video demonstrating the Menstrual Product Mambo for teaching the four types of menstrual products <https://vimeo.com/143278862> and dance steps projector slide <https://periodpositive.files.wordpress.com/2016/02/menstrual-product-mambo1.jpg?w=1680>

A resource booklet with photos explaining how to change a pad for young people with learning disabilities www.me-and-us.co.uk/ppg/ichangemypad.html

Resources (cont)

STAINS™ – activities based around Chella Quint's spoof company combating leaking taboos and promoting confidence in menstruators to "reclaim the stain" www.stainstm.com

The education resource magazine for the Wellcome Trust and Sex Education Forum co-produced Prepared for Puberty Project edition of the Sex Educational Supplement magazine www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/sex-educational-supplement

An audit you can use in a school/college/workplace to ensure that there is supportive provision for menstruation management <https://periodpositive.files.wordpress.com/2016/02/sef-period-positive-prepared-for-puberty.pdf>

A flowchart for finding the right words to use when including trans and non-binary menstruators <https://periodpositive.files.wordpress.com/2016/02/queeriods-lgbt-stem-poster-feb-2016.pdf>

See **#examsposters** www.periodpositive.com/resources for posters to display in exam halls.

Chella Quint: www.chellaquint.com

Become a **#periodpositive** partner!

Watch that TEDx Talk: **Adventures in Menstruating: Don't Use Shame to Sell.**

Listen to Chella providing a cultural history of menstrual taboos on BBC Radio 4's **A Bleeding Shame.**

Menstruation Education Should Be

- Free, unbranded, objective, inclusive of reusables (like menstrual cups and cloth pads), evidence-based, and easy to understand.
- Consistently taught by trained staff, factually accurate, up-to-date and well-researched, with learners' needs in mind, and regularly evaluated with pupils and menstruation education practitioners, including excellent communication with other departments, parents and community partners about the content of lessons.
- Aimed at different age groups, starting well before puberty (and ensuring the use of correct names for body parts, even with very young children) and revisited regularly.
- Inclusive of all genders, cultures, abilities and sexualities (the way all high-quality RSE should be), with adapted resources where appropriate.
- Supportive of easy menstruation management in school and equipped to signpost diverse and effective ways of menstruation management now and in future, including offering as-needed disposable menstrual products and ensuring that pupils are made aware of reusables and supported in using them.
- Delivered in planned curriculum lessons, as well as in teachable moments as they arise.

Menstruation Education Should Be (cont)

- Actively challenging messages of shame in media, advertising, current cultural discourse etc through activities that teach media literacy.
- Avoid using euphemisms like “Aunt Flo” or “sanitary products” – reinforce the use of correct terms: “menstruation”, “period” and “menstrual products”.
- Able to scaffold and complement lessons on fertility, puberty and reproductive health, with an awareness of physiological differences and medical conditions related to reproductive health and of healthy menstrual cycles as a vital sign.
- Supported more comprehensively across the curriculum, particularly in science and PSHE but also in media studies, PE, maths, graphics and textiles.

Local Offers and Providers

Provider	What they offer	Cost	Contact details
#periodpositive	A one-year pilot programme taking schools through a new #periodpositive Schools Charter, including school audit, free training for whole staff/subject specialists, advice for parents, workshops for young people and peer leaders, evaluation and monitoring.	Free for partner schools and organisations in Sheffield.	#periodpositive Contact: Chella Quint 07497 593 968
	Training for schools, teacher training programmes, charities and private companies hoping to improve their menstruation awareness or prevent period poverty.	Free or reduced cost for qualifying organisations, £250 day rate within the local area.	http://www.periodpositive.com chellaquint@gmail.com
	Menstruation 101 workshops for young people, young adults and parents of adolescents as a fun and interactive “catch-up” session.	Contact for details on costs of performances, bespoke events or provision outside the local area.	
	Adventures in Menstruating touring comedy show for young people and adults and accompanying workshops.		