

# LETS TALK ABOUT PERIODS

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Menstruation is a normal biological process and a key sign of reproductive health, yet in many cultures it is treated as something negative, shameful or dirty. The continued silence around menstruation combined with limited access to information at home and in schools results in millions of women and girls having very little knowledge about what is happening to their bodies when they menstruate and how to deal with it. A study from UNICEF revealed that 1 out of 3 girls in South Asia knew nothing about menstruation prior to getting it while 48% of girls in Iran and 10% of girls in India believe that menstruation is a disease (WaterAid 2013, Menstrual Hygiene Matters).

Even today in India and parts of South Asia, there are families, who treat a menstruating woman in a very humiliating way, and her attendance at the holy places in the house or in social functions is considered ill-fated.

Why is it that the lady or the daughter of the house who does all household chores on other days of the month, abruptly becomes polluted?

Why menstruating women are not allowed to enter temples?

Why we feel embarrassed while asking the shopkeeper for sanitary napkins? Why shopkeepers wrap up sanitary napkins in paper of black polybags before discreetly handing them over to customer?

We go to toilet every day to clean up our system, we take a bath, and we cut our nails, hairs.

Do we talk about these the same way as we talk about menstruation?

Why do girls have to talk about it in hush-hush tones? Even educated women hesitate in talking about periods and inconvenience that might be caused by it openly among male peers.

Is this because men are ill informed, ill-prepared and ill-guided about the way one should understand and appreciate mutual biological differences?

Is it that the culture is the culprit and we have allowed certain debilitating elements of our culture to prevail and persist? Why doesn't our curiosity about menstruation's ramifications generate conversation in a scientific manner.

So lets talk about it

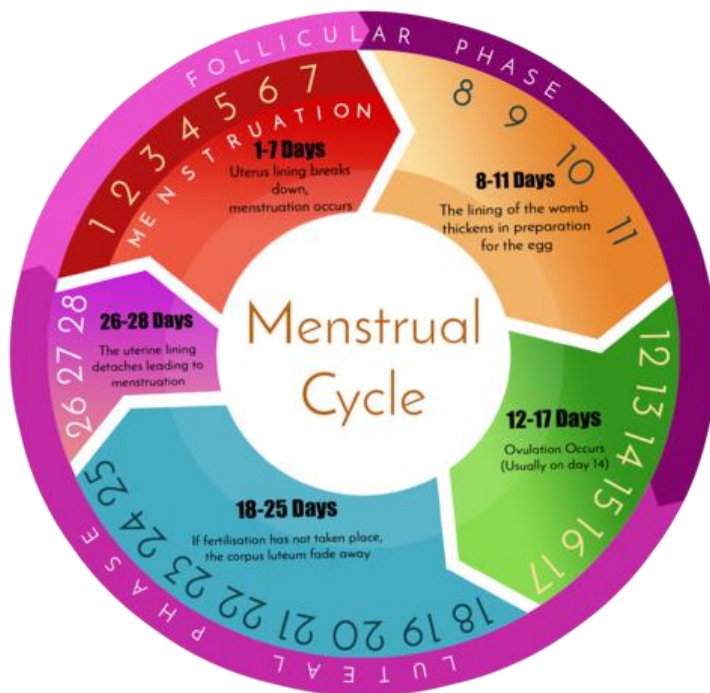
## What is menstruation?

Menstruation, or period, is normal vaginal bleeding that occurs as part of a woman's monthly cycle. Every month, your body prepares for pregnancy. If no pregnancy occurs, the uterus, or womb, sheds its lining. The menstrual blood is partly blood and partly tissue from inside the uterus. It passes out of the body through the vagina.

Periods usually start between age 11 and 14 and continue until menopause at about age 51. They usually last from three to five days.

## The Menstrual Cycle

The working of this cycle is quite simple. Once a month, an egg leaves the ovaries and goes through the fallopian tubes to the uterus.



At this time, the lining of the uterus thickens with extra blood and tissue to provide a cushion for the potentially fertilized egg.

If at this time, the egg gets fertilized with sperm then the fertilized egg will attach itself to the uterus, where it will slowly develop into a baby.

However, if the egg does not come in contact with sperm, the lining of the uterus will start to break down so that it may be shed.

Along with the lining, the unfertilized egg is also shed. Hence, your

“period” is this time of bleeding, which happens when your body is getting rid of this extra blood and tissue.

## What is normal bleeding?

There is a range of normal bleeding – some women have short, light periods and others have longer, heavy periods. Your period may also change over time.

Normal menstrual bleeding has the following features:

- Your period lasts for 3-8 days

- Your period comes again every 21-35 days (measured from the first day of one period to the first day of the next)
- The total blood loss over the course of the period is around 2-3 tablespoons but secretions of other fluids can make it seem more

### **Premenstrual syndrome (PMS)**

It's common for women and girls to experience some discomfort in the days leading to their periods. Premenstrual syndrome (PMS) includes both physical and emotional symptoms that many girls and women get right before their periods, such as acne, bloating, fatigue, backaches, sore breasts, headaches, constipation, diarrhoea, food cravings, depression, irritability, or difficulty concentrating or handling stress. PMS is usually at its worst during the 7 days before a girl's period starts and disappears once it begins.

Many girls also experience abdominal cramps during the first few days of their periods. They are caused by prostaglandins, chemicals in the body that makes the smooth muscle in the uterus contract. These involuntary contractions can be either dull or sharp and intense.

## **Managing periods: Menstrual Hygiene**

Women spend around six to seven years of their lives menstruating. Yet the importance of menstrual hygiene management (MHM) is mostly neglected. Menstrual hygiene is a taboo subject; a topic that many women are uncomfortable discussing in public. Menstrual hygiene is fundamental to the dignity and well-being of women and girls and an important part of the basic hygiene, sanitation and reproductive health services to which every woman and girl has a right. Here are some tips to help you stay clean and hygienic during your periods:

### **1. Change your sanitary napkin every 4-6 hours-**

Changing sanitary napkins within every 4-6 hours is the cardinal rule to establish vaginal hygiene. Menstrual blood, when released from the body attracts various organisms from our bodies, which multiply in the warmth of the blood, and cause irritation, rashes or urinary tract infections. Changing your sanitary napkin regularly curbs the growth of these organisms and prevents infections.

### **2. Wash yourself properly-**

Washing your vagina regularly is extremely important, because the organisms cling to your body after you have removed your sanitary napkin. Most people wash themselves regularly, but not the right way--which is, using your hands in motion from the vagina to the anus, not vice-versa. Motioning your hand from the anus to the vagina can lead to the transmission of the bacteria from the anus into the vagina or urethra opening leading to infections.

### 3. Don't use soaps or vagina hygiene products

While using vaginal hygiene products everyday is a good idea, using these products during menses can turn things around. Vaginas have their own cleaning mechanism which comes into play during menstrual cycles, and these artificial hygiene products can hamper the natural process leading to infections and growth of bacteria.

### 4. Discard the sanitary napkin properly

Disposing off your tampons and sanitary napkins properly is an important step. Wrap them properly before you throw them away, so the bacteria and infections do not spread. Make sure you don't flush them, since that will block the toilet causing the water to back up, spreading the bacteria all over it. Washing your hands properly is of utmost importance after you have wrapped and discarded the used tampons and sanitary napkins, since you're likely to touch the stained area while wrapping them.

### 5. Beware of a pad rash

A pad rash is something that you might experience during a period of heavy flow. It usually occurs when the pad has been wet for a long time and rubs along the thighs causing it to chaff. To prevent this from occurring, try to stay dry during your periods. If you do have a rash, change your pads regularly and stay dry. Apply an antiseptic ointment, after a bath and before bed – this will heal the rash and prevent further chaffing. If it gets worse do visit your doctor who will be able to prescribe you a medicated powder that can keep the area dry.

## Menstrual Problems

A variety of menstrual problems can affect girls. Some of the more common conditions are:

- **Dysmenorrhea** :when a girl has painful periods.
- **Menorrhagia** : when a girl has a very heavy periods with excess bleeding.
- **Oligomenorrhea** : when a girl misses or has infrequent periods, even though she's been menstruating for a while and isn't pregnant.
- **Amenorrhea** : when a girl hasn't started her period by the time she is 16 years old or 3 years after starting puberty, has not developed signs of puberty by age 14, or has had normal periods but has stopped menstruating for some reason other than pregnancy.

Girls and Women globally miss out on daily activities because of their periods, which commonly occurs because they view menstruation as a barrier and they lack the proper education to know how their bodies work. Something that happens to half of the population around the world every month shouldn't be taboo, and breaking the silence on what is often an unspoken topic is the first step towards destigmatizing.