

Menstruation

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The menstrual cycle, also known as your 'period', is part of the series of changes that your body undergoes during puberty. These changes are essential to make reproduction possible. Menstruation is basically when you bleed from your vagina.

It normally starts between 12 and 16 years old and ends at menopause between 45 and 55 years old. (See page 100-101) Menstruation usually lasts 2 to 7 days and the typical length of time between the first day of one period and the first day of the next is 21 to 35 days. You will thus have your period once every month.

Symptoms

It is normal to have symptoms before, during or just after you menstruated. Symptoms include:

- ❖ Acne
- ❖ Breast tenderness
- ❖ Bloating
- ❖ Tiredness
- ❖ Irritability
- ❖ Mood changes
- ❖ Cramping
- ❖ Back pain.

Menstruation is part of a woman's natural biological development. It is also an indication that you are not pregnant. Without menstruation reproduction and the wonder of life would not be possible. There might be times during your period that you mess some blood on your pants or bedding. This happens to the best of us and are nothing to be ashamed of.

You NEVER have to feel uncomfortable about this miracle that is called a women's body!

Tip

If you mess some menstrual blood on your clothing, try to wash it with soap as soon as is possible. Also remember to always wash it in cold water to ensure easy blood removal and prevent staining of your clothing.



Danger Signs

There is certain danger signs that you should be aware of when it comes to your period. You are the one person on this earth that knows your body best. If your body functions different than normal, it means that something might be wrong – so don't sit and think it might just go away. Do something about it!

The danger signs are usually nothing to worry about, but it might mean that you have an underlying problem. When you see the following signs – try to go and see your doctor as soon as possible. They will be able to tell you whether you have an underlying problem.

- ❖ More than 8 days variation between the length of your shortest period and the length of your longest period. (Count from the date of the first bleeding episode of one period to the first bleeding episode of you next period.)
- ❖ The length of menstrual bleeding during your period should also not vary with more than four days, from period to period.
- ❖ Little menstrual flow – less than 10 ml
- ❖ Very large menstrual flow – more than 80 ml
- ❖ More than 3 to 6 months without menstruation, during your reproductive years, while not being pregnant (Known as Amenorrhea)
- ❖ Irregular periods, except when a woman is near menopause (See page 100)
- ❖ Bleeding between menstrual periods or after sexual intercourse

The biggest indicator of a problem is a change of your normal period in length and amount of bleeding. Know your normal periods well, so that you can realise when your periods change.

Early puberty

When you start developing breasts before the age of 8 or start menstruating before 9 years old, it might be an indication that you have an underlying disease or problem. When this happens, you have to go and see a doctor.

Late puberty

When you have no menstrual bleeding (amenorrhea), with no other characteristics of puberty, you have to see a doctor at the age of 14. When you have no menstrual bleeding, but you do have signs of puberty, you should see a doctor at the age of 16. The absence of menstruation may indicate an underlying problem or disease, such as an eating disorder or malnutrition, that should be addressed. Intense exercise can also result in a lack of menstrual bleeding.



Other danger signs

Always be aware of vaginal discharge. If there is a change in normal menstrual discharge (white/ yellow in colour), you have to see a doctor. This is especially important when it has a foul smell and it has a strange colour. Itching, burning, irritation, painful sexual intercourse and painful urination are also danger signs and an indication to see a doctor.

Sanitary Pads

There are two items that are commonly used during menstruation to absorb the flow of blood: sanitary pads and tampons. Menstrual cups can also be used, but are less common.

Sanitary pads are attached to your panty during menstruation to absorb the menstrual blood during menstruation. The frequency that a person will need to change their pad will vary, depending on whether their menstrual flow is heavy or light.



There are several different types of disposable menstrual pads:

- Panty liners – Panty liners are designed to absorb light menstrual flow especially at the start or end of a period. It can also be used as backup for a tampon or menstrual cup.
- Pads (based on their absorbency) - Ultra-thin, Regular and Maxi/Super
- Overnight – A longer pad to allow for more protection when you are lying down. The absorbency of this pad is also higher.

These pads are usually available with or without wings. Wings are tabs that wrap around the sides of your underwear to add additional leak protection and help secure the pad in position.

Menstrual pads should be disposed of by either placing it in the menstrual bin next to most toilets or wrapping it in toilet paper and throwing it in a dustbin. Menstrual pads should never be flushed down the toilet, as it may cause blockage.



Cloth menstrual pads can also be used. In addition to the above mentioned pads, cloth menstrual pads are washable, reusable, eco-friendly, cost-effective and easy to make.

Where to get reusable menstrual pads

- Reusable menstrual pads can be bought online at mothernatureproducts.co.za for around R85.
- Reusable menstrual pads can also be self-made (see instructions below, or watch a YouTube video if you have internet access)
- Reusable menstrual pads can also be donated to girls that do not have access to pads. The 'Days for Girls' charity works with volunteers around the world to provide reusable menstrual pads to underprivileged communities.

How to make your own reusable cloth menstrual pad

You will need the following materials:

- thick paper
- marker pen & ruler
- scissors
- thin fabric (cotton is ideal)
- thick fabric (e.g. an old towel)
- a button
- a needle and thread
- a safety pin.

1) Draw a template (see picture) and cut it out



2) Reverse the material and trace the template over it using a marker. Do this twice.



- 3) Using sharp scissors, cut out the two cotton pieces.



- 4) Place one piece on top of the other, with the patterned sides facing each other.



- 5) Sew the sides of the two pieces of fabric together, leaving the top and bottom bits open.



- 6) Turn down the edges of the top and bottom bits and stitch along them, creating a hem.



- 7) Turn the fabric inside out, revealing the pattern and concealing the seams on the inside. Sew up the sides/wings.



- 8) Sew a button in the centre of the right wing.



- 9) Mark on the left wing where you will need a button hole. Cut the hole and sew around the edges of the hole to prevent fraying.



- 10) Use a ruler to cut two 20cm long x 6cm wide rectangles from a towel. Lay the pieces on top of each other and sew them together along the top and bottom.



- 11) Attach a large safety pin to the top of the lining. Then insert the lining into the casing, using the safety pin to pull it up to the top. Finally, remove the pin.



Tampons

A tampon is a feminine hygiene product that you insert into your vagina. It will then absorb menstrual blood flow. Your vagina holds the tampon in place while it expands due to the blood absorption. Tampons are available in several absorbency levels.

How to insert a tampon?

When looking at your private area, you'll see a bigger hole, which is your vagina, and in front of this a smaller hole, which is where your urine comes out. The tampon is placed in your vagina, therefore the tampon can stay in while you urinate. Most tampons have a cord or string for removal thereof.



Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS)

Toxic shock syndrome (TSS) is a rare condition caused by bacterial toxins in your vagina. TSS most commonly develop due to very absorbent tampons. TSS is an extremely serious condition. When you have some of the following symptoms it is urgent to see a doctor within a few hours:

- Fever
- Rash that resembles sunburn & Skin peeling
- Low blood pressure
- Feeling unwell
- Confusion

If you have this infection and are not treated, it can result in hospitalisation and even death. If you are wearing a tampon at the onset of these symptoms, the tampon should be removed immediately. With proper treatment, recovery will usually take 2 to 3 weeks.

How to prevent getting Toxic Shock Syndrome:

- Follow the package directions for correct insertion and usage of tampons
- Choose the lowest absorbency needed for your blood flow
- Change the tampon at least every 4 to 6 hours
- Alternate usage between tampons and pads
- Avoid using a tampon overnight or when you are sleeping

Menstrual cup

A menstrual cup is a reusable feminine hygiene product that is inserted into the vagina during menstruation. It collects menstrual blood flow and prevents it from leaking onto your clothes. The cup is usually shaped like a bell with a stem. The stem is used to insert and remove the menstrual cup. The bell-shaped cup seals against the vaginal wall and collects the blood.

Every 4 – 12 hours the cup needs to be removed, emptied, rinsed and reinserted. It is extremely important to rinse it with clean water, to prevent infections. After each menstrual period, the cup should be boiled for at least 5 minutes and stored for use during your next period.

Unlike tampons and pads, cups collect menstrual fluid rather than absorbing it. One cup can be reused for up to 5 years. This makes them more cost effective in the long run. The use of menstrual cups are considered safe.



Use

To insert the menstrual cup, it is first folded and then inserted into the vagina. It will normally unfold automatically and create a light seal against the vaginal walls. If the cup does not unfold by itself, you will have to twist the cup or flex your vaginal muscles to ensure the cup is fully open. If the cup is correctly inserted, the cup will not leak or cause any discomfort. The menstrual cup is placed lower in the vagina than a tampon, the stem should however still be completely inside the vagina. The menstrual cup can be removed by pinching the base of the cup. Simply pulling the stem will not remove the cup. It is recommended to remove the cup over a toilet to prevent spillage of the menstrual blood.

Most menstrual cups come in a smaller and a larger size. The smaller size are usually recommended for women under 30 who have not given birth vaginally. The larger size is recommended for women who are over 30, or those who have given birth vaginally, or have a heavy flow of menstrual blood. Firmness of the cup should also be considered. A firmer cup pops open more easily after insertion and may hold a more consistent seal against the vaginal wall but many women find softer cups more comfortable.

Vaginal cups are available at most pharmacies and 'Clicks' stores.

