



A Comprehensive Guide to Menstrual Health

A 3rd edition Menstrual Health Guide prepared by the Kunashe Foundation Trust Zimbabwe. This menstrual health guide is an introductory guide to menstrual health management.

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MENSTRUAL HEALTH IN THE CONTEXT OF DEVELOPMENT

Hello there!

We have put this 2nd edition Menstrual Health guide together for all women because understanding our bodies is an essential part of women's development! This guide seeks to provide you with free access to reliable and researched information. Recognising and addressing menstrual health is crucial for promoting gender equality, empowering girls and women and fostering inclusive and sustainable development. This is important because:

- Girls are missing school because of a lack of knowledge on how to manage their periods.
- Women are missing out on work due to absenteeism related to their menstrual health.
- There is a lack of urgency around access to safe water, sanitation and facilities.
- There is a lack of access to affordable sanitary products.
- Fact-based Menstrual Health Management is not being taught to girls leading to lifelong general misinformation.

This Comprehensive Menstrual Health Guide will take you through the basics concerning Menstrual Health and Hygiene. The ultimate goal is to create an informed and equipped generation of women!

Enjoy your flow,

TEAM KUNASHE

WHAT IS HAPPENING IN MY BODY?

Getting you to know about your menstrual health means understanding your body first and foremost. From birth, your body is preparing the female body for menstruation. The biggest of these preparations takes place through the secretion of various hormones from what is called an Endocrine System. This system is made up of glands that produce various hormones- which are the body's chemical messengers, carrying information and instructions from one set of cells to another.

The endocrine system regulates how much of each hormone is released. This hormonal regulation can be affected by stress, infections, what we consume and any significant changes happening in the body.

Female reproductive system

A female reproductive system is designed to carry out several functions. It produces the female egg cells necessary for reproduction, called the ova or oocytes. The system is designed to transport these oocytes to the site of fertilization.

The fertilization of an egg by sperm normally occurs in the fallopian tubes. Next, the fertilized egg is implanted into the walls of the uterus, beginning the initial stages of pregnancy. If fertilization and/or implantation does not take place, the system is designed to menstruate (the monthly shedding of the uterine lining).

The female reproductive system produces female sex hormones that maintain the reproductive cycle.

Cervix: provides a passage between the vaginal cavity and the uterine cavity. The cervix is only about 4 centimetres long, and projects about 2 centimetres into the upper vaginal cavity.

The endometrium: this is the lining inside the uterus. The endometrium contains numerous glands and increases in thickness during the menstrual cycle until ovulation occurs. The surface layers are shed during menstruation if conceptions do not occur

Fallopian Tube (uterine tube): these are tubes that stretch from the uterus to the ovaries and are part of the female reproductive system. The fertilized egg passes through the Fallopian tubes from the ovaries of female mammals to the uterus.

Ovaries: are small, oval-shaped glands located on either side of your uterus. They produce and store your eggs (also called ovum) and make hormones that control your menstrual cycle and pregnancy.

The uterus: also known as the womb, is an about 8 cm long hollow muscular organ. Once the egg has left the ovary it can be fertilized and implant itself in the lining of the uterus. The main function of the uterus is to nourish the developing fetus prior to birth.

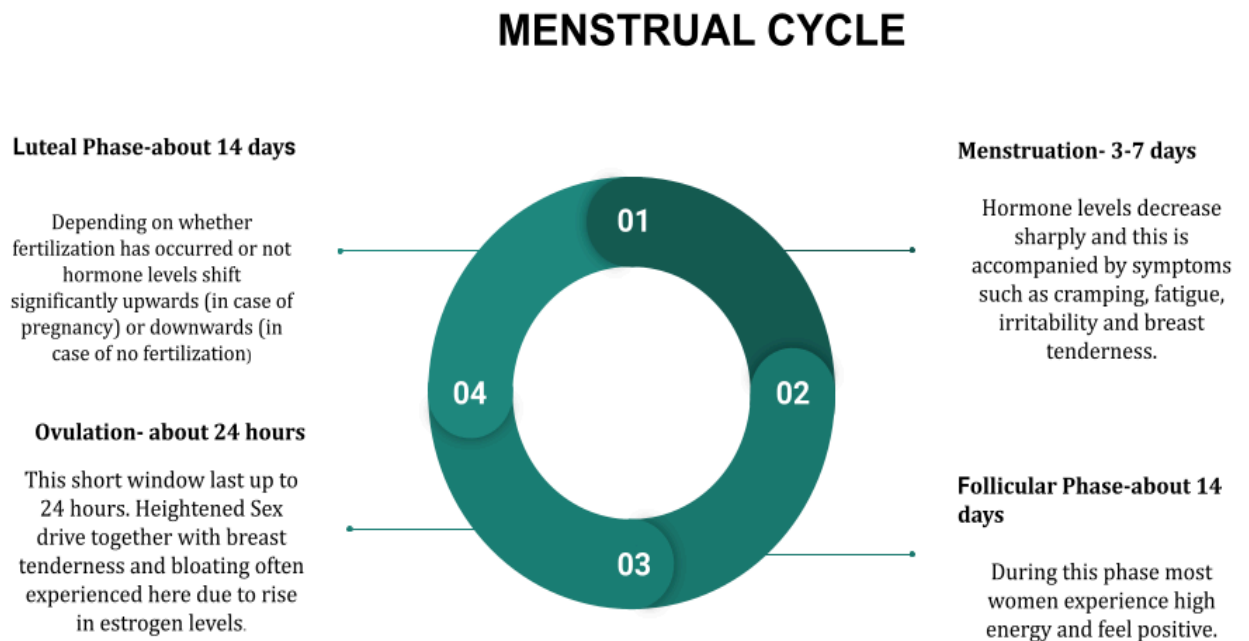
Vagina: a closed muscular canal that extends from the vulva, the outside of the female genital area to the neck of the uterus (cervix).

Understanding Menstruation

We would not be doing any justice to ourselves if we did not discuss the science associated with the menstrual cycle. The menstrual cycle is like the practical side of the biology lesson as we experience it first-hand every month but do we know what really is happening during the menstrual cycle?

The length of the menstrual cycle varies from woman to woman, but the average is approximately 28 days. The menstrual cycle is the time from the first day of a woman's period to the day before her next period. Within those days, there are four stages which are mentioned below:

STAGES OF THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE



MENSTRUAL HEALTH KIT ESSENTIALS

Being on your period at work or school can be very uncomfortable. While many people master this over time, we believe you can be well prepared and avoid any embarrassment or leaks by having a handy period kit. This may include a variety of items, depending on your period but here are some suggestions:

Wet wipes: When having a period, once the blood comes into contact with air it begins to smell, so wiping using a tissue might not get rid of all the smell. There might be a need to use wet wipes. Wipes are easy to carry around, disposable and convenient. You don't need fancy high-end wipes, unscented baby wipes are recommended.

Painkillers: Pain is not normal but discomfort is. To manage pain, one can use over-the-counter medicines, hot water bottles, zumbani or black tea. If pain is not

manageable, seek medical attention. If you suffer from menstrual cramps, then you definitely need to carry over-the-counter medication with you when you go to work or school. Remember to contact your healthcare provider to find out what the best medication is for you.

Comfortable underwear: when menstruating it is recommended to wear comfortable underwear. You need to be as comfortable as possible and cotton layered pants are the best to reduce the chances of leakage and are breathable.

Feeling comfortable is paramount during your menstrual cycle so be sure to pack whatever you need in your kit together with some emergency sanitary wear. We are now going to explore the different options for sanitary wear so you can make well-informed choices.

RECOMMENDED SANITARY PRODUCTS

There are several safe sanitary products available on the market. It's up to one to decide which one is most comfortable for them. The following will unpack the options available for menstrual hygiene products

Disposable Pads

They are like a rite of passage for every girl once they experience their first period. Disposable pads are worn on the underwear to absorb menstrual blood. It is recommended to change disposable pads every 3-4 hours depending on the flow. When removing the pad, wash your hands first to avoid infections.

Benefits

Variety: disposable pads are offered in a greater variety of shapes, sizes, absorbency levels, and brands so one has a wide range to choose from depending on preference.

Availability: disposable pads are readily available in all stores, hence, this is very convenient especially if you are travelling.

Disposal: Depending on your level of comfort, simply wrap the used pad or wash, wrap and then dispose of it safely. These should not be flushed as they can cause drain blockages.

LeakProof: When worn correctly (and changed regularly) sanitary pads with wings can reduce the risk of leaks and spoiled clothing.

Challenges

Potentially Harmful Chemicals: Disposable pads are whitened with chlorine bleach, which produces a toxic byproduct called dioxin. Disposables also contain plastic chemicals. These are potentially harmful to sensitive skin.

Long-term cost: because disposable pads can only be used once there is an accumulative cost that comes with it.

Environmental Impacts: on average a woman will use 12,000 to 16,000 disposable pads, party-liners, and tampons in her lifetime, which all are harmful to the environment. According to Women's Environmental Network (2020), tampons, disposable pads, and panty liners along with their packaging and individual wrapping generate more than 200,000 tonnes of waste per year globally which is harmful to the environment.

Reusable Pads

Reusable pads are cheap, simple, sustainable and straightforward. They are worn on the underwear, to absorb menstrual flow and held in place usually by snaps. They are made from absorbent materials such as fleece, and PVC. These must be changed every 4 hours depending on the flow. After use, they should be washed and dried. They can be used for up to five years depending on care.

Benefits

Reusable sanitary pads are made of breathable material. As mentioned above, disposable pads are made of 90% plastic, hence there is moisture build-up when wearing a disposable pad. This results in bacteria build-up and sometimes yeast infections. However, because reusable pads do not contain any plastic in them, they are more favourable to your vaginal health as they are breathable (made from products such as cotton) and do not cause moisture build-up.

Good for those with sensitive skin: reusable sanitary pads are thicker. But they're also cooler, 'breathable', and more gentle on sensitive areas. They are not fragranced.

Affordability: Unlike disposable pads that you constantly need to purchase, reusable pads are more economical. You can use reusable sanitary pads for up to five years depending on the quality and maintenance of the reusable sanitary pads. Hence, if you are buying reusable sanitary pads over the materials to make them by yourself the initial cost might seem more costly, however, it is a long-term investment.

Challenges

Maintenance: Reusable pads require a significant amount of effort to maintain as they require regular washing and thorough drying outside.

Availability of water: washing a reusable sanitary pad requires a private and water-abundant facility. This can be a challenge for those without ready access to water and sanitation facilities.

Stigma: due to societal stigma, there is often a reluctance to dry pads outside in the sunlight due to privacy concerns, and lack of open-air drying can increase the presence of harmful bacteria on the pads if they are not dried properly.

Menstrual Cups

The menstrual cup is a cup made of medical-grade silicone that is inserted into the vagina to collect menstrual blood. Depending on your flow it can be worn for up to 10 hours.

Benefits

Sustainable: The menstrual cup lasts up to 10 years.

Low-irritant: The materials are made suitable for sensitive individuals and leave you more naturally lubricated than tampons which draw away moisture.

Limited odour: Unlike pads, the cup prevents blood from coming into contact with open air and so does not often generate a smell.

Convenience when active: When inserted correctly the cup allows you to wear it whilst doing sports, swimming, and bathing without being disrupted.

Challenges

Initial cost: Menstrual cups are costly initially. These can cost upwards of USD\$10 depending on the brand and supplier.

Insertion and removal: It takes a little practice to get used to the process of insertion and removal of the cup.

Stigma: The cup is a fairly new product and little is known about it in developing countries. Further, because of the nature of its use, the cup is often ignored as a relevant option for young girls who are not yet sexually active. Older women are more willing to try the cup, however, many remain concerned about the size of the cup. A great deal of work needs to be done to inform society about the use of the menstrual cup.

Period Pants

Reusable period pants are simple, sustainable, and straightforward. They are worn the same way as ordinary pants. They are made from various absorbent materials. These must be changed every 4-6 hours depending on the flow. After use, they should be washed and dried. They can be used for up to five years depending on care and cost varies depending on the supplier.

Benefits

Period Pants are made of breathable material and are good for those with sensitive skin as they contain minimal chemicals and are not fragranced.

Affordability: Unlike disposable pads that you constantly need to purchase, reusable pads are more economical. You can use the period pant for up to five years depending on the quality and maintenance. This makes this a cheaper and more sustainable option in the long run.

Challenges

Availability of water: washing period pants requires a private and water-abundant facility. This can be a challenge for those without ready access to water and sanitation facilities.

Stigma: due to societal stigma, there is often a reluctance to dry pants outside in the sunlight due to privacy concerns, and lack of open-air drying can increase the presence of harmful bacteria on the pants if they are not dried properly.

Always remember that your sanitary wear is your choice. Make the best choice for yourself and do not be afraid to try different methods depending on your flow, preference, and activity level.

MENSTRUAL HYGIENE ESSENTIALS

Change sanitary wear regularly: During the monthly flow, change your sanitary wear every four to six hours depending on one's flow. For those who have heavy flow changing more frequently is advisable. Before you change into new sanitary wear, clean or wipe your hands to prevent infections like urinary tract infections, vaginal infections, pad rash, and skin rashes.

How to clean the genital area: It is important to clean the genital area every time after using the toilet and keep it as dry as possible in order to prevent chafing. When cleaning the genital area one has to begin from the vagina to the anus using clean warm water. When bathing, use cold or warm water to clean. Dry thoroughly with a clean towel, where possible have a small soft towel meant for the sensitive area only.

Wash hands before and after changing sanitary wear: It is vital to wash hands first before changing sanitary wear because it helps to avoid the spread of bacteria.

Discarding used sanitary wear: Used sanitary wear is capable of spreading infections and can smell very bad. Wrapping it well before discarding it ensures that the smell is contained.

Just Breathe: Your vagina needs to breathe to avoid infections. One way is to keep pubic hair minimal to avoid sweat and dirt build-up. Wherever possible, only wear cotton underwear. This will help your vagina to breathe.

COMMON INFECTIONS TO LOOK OUT FOR

Did you know that the vagina has a self-cleaning mechanism? Even though this is the case the vagina can be upset by several unwanted infections. Below are some common conditions that may develop:

Bacterial Vaginosis (BV): is the most common vaginal infection in women of childbearing age, which happens when the normal bacteria (germs) in the vagina get out of balance from douching or from sexual contact. Symptoms include vaginal discharge that can be white, grey, or thick and have a fishy odour, burning or pain when urinating, or itching around the outside of the vagina. There may be no symptoms as well.

Thrush: is a yeast infection, and is characterised by a thick white discharge. It can be caused by hormonal changes, from a disruption in the body's probiotics when taking antibiotics, wearing underwear that is not dry or can also be the result of douching.

Urinary Tract Infection (UTI): is an infection anywhere in the urinary tract or organs that collect and store urine and release it from your body (the kidneys, ureters, bladder, and urethra). An infection occurs when microorganisms, usually bacteria from the digestive tract, cling to the urethra (opening to the urinary tract) and begin to multiply.

While discharge is normal it is important to know which discharge is not normal. Discharge that is yellow, green, grey, chunky consistency, or producing foul-smell requires medical attention- please visit your local health care provider.

COMMON MENSTRUAL HEALTH-RELATED CONDITIONS

There are various conditions associated with the menstrual cycle. Every woman is unique and they experience different things during their cycles. Some women have to deal with some gruesome discomforts and conditions during their cycles. These conditions are discussed below in detail.

Dysmenorrhea: often referred to as period pain characterised by severe and frequent menstrual cramps and pain associated with menstruation. The cause of dysmenorrhea depends on whether the condition is primary or secondary. With primary dysmenorrhea, women experience abnormal uterine contractions resulting from a chemical imbalance in the body. Secondary dysmenorrhea is caused by other medical conditions, most often endometriosis.

Menorrhagia is a menstrual health condition characterized by abnormally heavy or prolonged menstrual bleeding. Women with menorrhagia may experience bleeding that lasts longer than 7 days, soaks through multiple pads or tampons, or include large clots. This condition can disrupt daily life, cause anemia, and lead to emotional distress.

Anemia is a condition where the body has a lower-than-normal number of red blood cells or the red blood cells don't have enough hemoglobin, a protein that carries oxygen to different parts of the body. In menstrual health, anemia is often caused by heavy menstrual bleeding, which can lead to iron deficiency anemia. This is because iron is lost through menstrual blood, and anemia can occur if not enough iron is consumed through diet or supplements.

Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS): is an unpleasant or uncomfortable symptom during your cycle that may temporarily disturb normal functioning. These symptoms may last from 2 hours to up to 7 days, depending on the duration of your period, and the types and intensity of symptoms can vary in individuals.

Endometriosis: is a painful condition in which tissue similar to the tissue that forms the lining of your uterus grows outside of your uterine cavity. The lining of your uterus is called the endometrium. Endometriosis occurs when endometrial tissue grows on your ovaries, bowel, and tissues lining your pelvis. It's unusual for endometrial tissue to spread beyond your pelvic region, but it's not impossible.

Polycystic ovarian syndrome: happens when a woman's ovaries or adrenal glands produce more male hormones than normal. One result is that cysts (fluid-filled sacs) develop on the ovaries. Women who are obese are more likely to have PCOS. Women with PCOS are at increased risk of developing diabetes and heart disease.

Uterine fibroids: are the most common noncancerous tumors in women of childbearing age. Fibroids are made of muscle cells and other tissues that grow in and around the wall of the uterus, or womb. The cause of fibroids is unknown. Risk factors include being overweight.

Amenorrhea is a menstrual health condition where a woman's periods stop or never start. This can be caused by hormonal imbalances, stress, or certain medical conditions. If left untreated, amenorrhea can lead to infertility, osteoporosis, and other reproductive health issues. Women experiencing amenorrhea may also face emotional and psychological challenges, including anxiety and low self-esteem. Seeking medical attention is essential to diagnose and treat the underlying cause of amenorrhea, ensuring a woman's reproductive health and overall well-being.

Some women may have a condition with no symptoms. That is why it is important to see your healthcare provider for routine examinations.

It is important to realize that while discomfort can be expected in some cases, pain is not normal. If you or loved ones are experiencing pain please visit your physician or gynaecologist.

In a nutshell, no one wishes to have the following conditions dysmenorrhea, premenstrual syndrome, endometriosis, cervical dysplasia, menorrhoea, gynaecological cancer, polycystic ovary syndrome, interstitial cystitis, uterine fibroids. However, they do occur in young girls and women. If you find yourself facing any of the symptoms mentioned above visit your nearest healthcare provider.

AN EQUIPPED GENERATION OF WOMEN!

We have come to the end of our Comprehensive Women's Guide to Menstrual Health. Getting to know about your body is not only empowering but it has the ability to improve your life and the lives of the women around you. If you are struggling with anything at all please contact your healthcare provider for support.

Remember, there is no shame and no need to fear when it comes to menstrual health. Let's get informed and help educate our community in order to end period poverty and its effects on women across the world.

For more information feel free to visit our [Instagram](#) pages and [Website](#). If you would like to get in touch with us or to support our work email us at info@kunashefoundation.org

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Developed and Edited by the Kunashe Foundation Research Team

Disclaimer: This guidebook is designed and prepared to be used as a support resource for menstrual health and hygiene. This does not replace medical information and women suffering from any menstrual-related conditions are advised to seek medical attention.