



# Pocket handbook on menstrual hygiene management for Rural Women Ambassadors

Rural Aid Foundation

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*“Normalize periods, enjoy growth”*





## Foreword

Rural Aid Foundation works with Adolescent Girls and Young women -who serve as linkages between Rural Aid Foundation and their communities. They are trained and supported by Rural Aid Foundation to extend digital and health rights information and services closer to their respective communities in through a range of approaches such as; community sensitization, outreaches, home visits, peer to peer engagements, dialogue meetings, media outreaches among others; thus, reaching the most vulnerable and most at risk communities in hard-to-reach rural areas in Uganda. This pocket handbook on Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) is intended for adolescent girls and young women who reach their peers with information on menstruation in order to challenge negative norms and address knowledge gaps on menstruation as a natural and normal body function among women and girls. Issues associated with menstruation are never discussed openly and the silence surrounding menstruation burdens young girls and women by keeping them ignorant of this biological function. Very little information is usually given to young girls (especially those in remote rural hard to reach communities) about the physiological processes involved and the hygienic practices to be followed. The result has been embarrassment, shock, stigma, loss of confidence and discrimination among those girls during their periods. This booklet provides information on how to handle menstruation, improve their knowledge on menstruation personal hygiene and boost their confidence. It also provides information on the myths and facts surrounding this issue. The booklet will serve as a reference tool for adolescent girls and young women to provide information on menstruation (periods), menstrual hygiene management and address period stigma among their peers, family members and community members. The booklet was developed as part of Rural Aid Foundation's **Period Normalization Project (PENP) among migrant Adolescent Girls and Young Women in Kyakazihire sub county in Kibaale district, Uganda** with support from IRISE Institute of East Africa. We hope this booklet will also be utilized by civil society organizations, networks such as 'The Period equality Network' among others to reach adolescent girls and young women with relevant information on menstrual hygiene management and period stigma.





## Preface

Menstrual Hygiene is an issue that every girl and woman have to deal with once they enter their adolescence, starting from around the age of 11 and until they reach their menopause somewhere in their 40's.

A woman spends approximately 2,100 days menstruating (about six years of their life). Menstruation, a monthly occurrence that requires access to appropriate materials and facilities, without which, females suffer from poor menstrual hygiene which affects their reproductive health and confidence to undertake their daily activities. To maintain women's dignity, it is critical that they are empowered to access proper menstrual hygiene services and products. Most women experience their first menstruation between 11 and 14 years during a stage of rapid growth and development. However, the myths surrounding menstruation especially among girls and women living in remote hard to reach rural communities hinders them from discussing their needs and the problems of poor menstrual hygiene management. This has further been exacerbated by lack of information on the process of menstruation, the physical and psychological changes associated with puberty and proper management of menstruation. There is need to change family and community norms and beliefs to address period stigma owing to the fact that girls and young people have a right to understand their sexual reproductive health and rights issues including menstruation and how to handle menstrual hygiene. This pocket handbook will support girls and women by providing basic factual information about menstruation and menstrual hygiene management while clarifying some of the myths and taboos on which period stigma thrives. The handbook will also be used as a reference guide for women ambassadors to sensitize their peers and communities on menstruation, menstrual hygiene management especially in rural hard to reach communities. This handbook will equip adolescent girls and young women with knowledge on menstruation, menstrual hygiene and management, increase their confidence, strengthen their capacity to seek and access health care services while navigating the negative social and cultural norms and myths associated with menstruation.



## Adolescence and body changes

This section discusses the physical and emotional changes during puberty. It enables young girls and women to understand their body changes with a focus on the physical and emotional changes that take place during puberty so that they are able to appreciate them as part of the normal human development process.

Menstruation among girls starts between 9 and 14 years of age. When puberty starts (the growth from childhood to adulthood), it is natural and normal that girls experience their first menstruation. However, during this time most girls are not aware of menstruation, its health, social and mental implications as well as proper hygiene management processes for the issue. Most girls during this time think menstruation is a health complication; others think they are too dirty to be in public and so, they choose to be indoors and out of the public eye. Although menstruation is a normal and natural process, many girls and young women face social, mental and physical challenges while coping up with it.

## Puberty and menstruation

Puberty refers to the changes that occur in humans (both boys and girls) as they grow. It refers to the physical body and emotional changes that occur as one grows from childhood stage to adulthood stage usually starting from between 10 and 14 years. These changes can be different for boys and girls. It is normal for these changes to occur-it is a natural process that everyone normal person must undergo as they transit into adulthood.

## Physical changes during puberty among girls

- ❖ Growth of breasts-starting between 8 and 13 years. The size of breasts may differ from one girl to another -so it's normal. It takes a different amount of time for each girl to develop breasts. If a girl starts later than other girls, it does not mean that her breasts will always be smaller.
- ❖ Widening of hips.
- ❖ Girls start their menstruation periods- small amounts of blood from the vagina on a monthly basis and it is a normal process for every woman until they reach their menopause (in their 40's).



- ❖ Growth spurt -where the girls start to grow taller between 10 and 11 years and the height increases tremendously at about 16 years
- ❖ Emergence of body odor and mood changes which are also linked to the maturing body, particularly to hormones and sexual development.

### Emotional changes during puberty

During these changes, the girls become stressed about their appearance in the household and the community. Some of the emotional symptoms associated with the menstrual cycle include: depression, angry outbursts, irritability anxiety, confusion, social withdrawal. But all girls do not experience all these the symptoms during each of their monthly cycles, it varies among individuals.

**Changing emotions** – During puberty, young people might become easily upset. Issues such as losing temper than usual, getting angry with friends or family members happens more easily. Feeling sad or depressed sometimes is very common but young people need to talk to adults they trust about any feelings of anger, sadness, or depression they have for support.

**Sexual feelings** – During puberty, it is normal to become more aware of the opposite sex and to feel more sexual. Having sexual feelings is normal and is nothing to feel guilty about. Coping with these feelings however is a big challenge because it may result into risk behaviors such as engaging in unprotected sex to explore; partly because the young people are not aware of the implications and this is where most girls and boys will break their virginity.

**Sense of identity** – Girls start to try to understand who they are, discover new friends and peers

**Future uncertainty** –Girls often start getting worried about the future and what tomorrow might bring.

**Mood swings** – Because of fluctuations in hormone levels, the accompanying physical changes, mood swings are common and girls become angry, short tempered over small things.

**Peer pressure** – The peer group often sets the standards for appropriate dress, language and behavior. Often, the behavior of the peer group is different than that expected by parents of their daughter. It is important that the parents have open communication with their child to ensure their safety during this period.

**Self-consciousness** -Girls usually develop physically faster than boys. Young girls may be self-conscious about their breasts and menstrual periods. While feeling of shyness is acceptable, one needs to see that you do not withdraw yourself from regular activities and do not develop low self-esteem. Each one has a unique sense of beauty and one does not have to feel bad about the physical changes occurring

### Strategies to support girls during puberty

**Learning and awareness** -teach girls about the physical and emotional changes during puberty so that they are prepared to face them. The changes should not be a shock to them to ensure





they challenge the social, cultural and health implications of puberty.

**Understanding the changes-**The girls must understand that these changes are natural and normal for every female human being and so they should not face anxiety or fear once they happen.

**Coping and adaption-**Once the changes start to happen, the girls must be equipped with skills to cope and adapt in order to live with these challenges. This includes, adapting to strategies to proper management of such changes such as menstruation, odor etc

**Communication-** Girls need to communicate open about the changes with parents, health workers, friends, teachers and peers or other relatives. This will ensure proper management of health-related issues such as pains during menstruation, address stigma associated with the changes and receive support in coping with any doubts.

## Menstruation and Menstrual hygiene management among adolescent girls and young women

Menarche is the first menstrual period of a female during adolescence. In some cultures, it is associated with adulthood and sometime times this leads to negative social and cultural norms such as forcing girls into marriage once they experience their first "period" because parents believe they are old enough to get married and bear children. This is not right! Like it was mentioned earlier, menstruation may start as early as 9 or 10 years and so this does not mean one is old enough to get married and bear children. Parents and other stakeholders such as local leaders, police, child rights organizations must ensure the rights of children are upheld. There are a lot of myths and misconceptions and lack of facts around the topic of menstruation and this exposes girls to discrimination, stigma which results into limited access to health services, increased rights violations such as forced marriages, forced school drop outs, denial of health information from skilled health providers among girls during their menstrual periods. This section, through a question-and-answer approach provides facts on menstruation. Menstruation is a normal process and if proper knowledge is given to girl regarding its onset, management and problems associated with it, then the negative issues against it can be mitigated.

### What is menstruation?

Menstruation is the normal, healthy shedding of blood and tissue from the uterus that exits the body through the vagina. The vagina is the small opening that girls have between their legs. Menstruation is also called a girls/woman's "period" It usually lasts between three and seven days and it happens for most girls about once a month. It is a sign that a girl can now become pregnant if they engage in un protected sex. Women stop menstruating once they get pregnant and start





again after child delivery.



## What is menarche?

Menarche is defined as the first menstrual period in a female adolescent. Menarche typically occurs between the ages of 10 and 16, with the average age of onset being 12.4 years.

## At what age does menstruation start?

There is no standard age at which menstruation starts. Some girls may begin to menstruate as early as age 9 or 10 years, and some may not get their first period until a few years later. Menstruation usually stops in the 40's and this is known as menopause. However, if a girl reaches age 16 and has not yet had her first period, she should visit a health provider/doctor.

Myth: That when a girl starts menstruating, it is a sign of maturity and they should get married.

Fact: Menstruation is just a normal process for all females and it shows the person is transitioning to another stage of development. Some girls start menstruation as early as 9 or 10 years and at that age, one is not ready to get married to bear children. Girls should be left to stay with their parents and receive all the support they need and they can choose whether to get married or not in their adult age-about 18 and above years.

## How do I know if my first period is about to start or happen?

It is not obvious that one can know that they are about to start their periods. Most girls begin menstruating between the ages of 11 and 14. Signs such as underarm hair and a whitish discharge from the vagina could indicate that menarche probably is approaching.

## Are periods painful? Do they hurt?

The process of menstruation itself is painless. Some girls experience cramps or other symptoms before or at the start of their period. There is no need to be scared about getting the periods. It is a completely normal process. But in case you experience painful periods, seek medical attention from a health service provider.

## What should I do to support a girl who has got her first period?

If you know about menstruation before it happens for the first time, you will be better prepared to handle this situation without fear or embarrassment. If it does come unexpectedly, do not panic. Contact your mother, aunt, sister, health worker, teacher, friend for support and advice on which products to use.

## How much blood flow can I expect?

The menstrual flow (amount of blood moving out of the vagina during menstruation) can vary widely from person to person. Usually, an entire period consists of a few to several





spoonfuls of blood (about 30-40ml approximately 5 tea spoons) – how much depends on the individual. The blood often starts off as a rusty color and then gets redder. It lightens to a rust color again until it stops. The amount of blood can also vary from day to day.

### What processes take place during menstruation?

Girls have thousands of tiny eggs in their ovaries even at the time of birth. Each month, or on average of every 21 - 35 days, one of the eggs leaves an ovary and travels through a fallopian tube- a process called ovulation. Normally, the ovaries alternate each month, releasing an egg from the left ovary one month and then releasing an egg from the right ovary the next month. As the egg travels in the fallopian tube, a soft spongy lining forms in the uterus. This lining is mostly made of tiny blood vessels called the endometrium. The lining gives nourishment in case an egg and sperm meet to form an embryo, or baby, that begins to grow in the uterus. If the egg is not joined by a sperm, the endometrium or lining of the uterus is not needed. It flows out of the vagina. This bleeding is called a period. This whole cycle is called menstruation.

### What is a menstrual cycle?

This describes the changes happening in a woman or girl's ovary and endometrium in preparation for an egg to be released and possibly be fertilized by a man's sperm. If the egg is not fertilized, the egg and endometrium are shed as menstrual blood and the cycle continues.

### What are the stages of the menstrual cycle?

The four stages of the menstrua cycle include;

- ❖ An egg develops in the ovary
- ❖ The egg moves down the fallopian tube and the lining of the womb/uterus thickens.
- ❖ The egg reaches the uterus and lining continues to thicken.
- ❖ The egg is not fertilized and the lining of the womb and the egg are shed as menstrual blood.

### What is the length of the menstrual cycle?

The length of the menstrual cycle (the time between first day of one period and the first day of the next) varies for each girl. For some women and girls, the cycle is as short as 21 (or even fewer) days. For others, it is as long as 35 days or more.

### Can a woman to get pregnant if she has sex without contraception or without protection at any point during her menstrual cycle?

Yes because;

- ❖ The egg may still be inside the womb during a woman's period. The egg is just a size of a full stop so it's impossible to know when it passes out of the womb with the menstrual blood.
- ❖ Another egg may have already been released as part of the next cycle





- ❖ Sperm can remain in the womb for 2-3 day

### How long should a period last?

Menstrual periods can vary from girl to girl. One girl might have a 3-day period and another girl might have a 7-day period. It might take several months/years for a girl's period to become regular. One month the period might last 4 days, whereas the next month it might be 6 days. Number of days that normally a girl's period should last is anything from 3 to 7 days.

### How do know a normal period?

While most menstrual cycles are between 28 and 30 days long. Periods that come anywhere from 21 to 35 days apart are considered normal in most situations. The amount of menstrual fluid lost during your period averages from 4 to 12 teaspoons for the majority of women; however, there are many variations of normal among women. Most periods last from 3 to 5 days, however it's not abnormal for a period to last for 7 days.

### Is it normal to have white or yellow discharges in between periods?

Girls can sometimes see secretions on their underpants or experience a feeling of wetness. These secretions are a whitish liquid which occur around the time of ovulation, when the body is ready to receive a fertilized egg. Secretions help sperm travel through the uterus to meet the egg for fertilization, so when a girl has secretions, she knows that this is the time when she is fertile. Paying attention to vaginal secretions helps girls understand their bodies. For example, yellow or strong-smelling secretions are not normal. These kinds of secretions are often a sign of infection, it is better to consult a doctor.

### Can anyone know when a girl has her periods?

No. Unless she tells someone. But when she gets her first period, she should tell someone she trusts in order to get all the support she needs and answers to any questions she might have.

### Are there foods a girl should avoid during menstruation?

No. The idea that certain foods should not be eaten at this time is a myth. However, lower intake of sodium salts helps in reducing the bloated feeling associated during periods.

### Preparing and managing periods

Menarche indicate the start of the menstrual cycle and once menstruation starts, it is recommended that a girl keeps track of their menstrual cycle including tracking the time of the month when it is likely to happen. This will enable her to avoid any embarrassment associated with staining of clothes but also this helps to create confidence in dealing with the physiological issues associated with periods. It also enables the girl or woman to adopt a method of menstrual hygiene that allows her to keep active with her routine work such as working, attending school, moving, running meeting friends and family members among





others. This following question and answers explores the signs that show menstruation will soon start or has started to enable the girl or woman prepare or effectively handle the issue by adopting the right menstrual hygiene methods.

### How do you know menstruation has started?

A girl knows that she has started her period when a little blood comes out of her vagina. The blood does not pour like water from a tap but it comes out slowly. By the time she has noticed a feeling of unusual wetness, her panties have absorbed any blood that has come out. This is why it is important to anticipate approximately when each month she will start bleeding, so she can wear a sanitary pad or other protection to prevent the blood from staining her clothes.

### What are the other signs of menstruation a girl or woman should be aware of?

- ❖ Bleeding is the major sign of menstruation (blood flow from the vagina) but other signs include;
- ❖ Headache and fatigue
- ❖ Mood swings and Irritation-feeling agitated or angry over small things
- ❖ Cramping (pains in the lower abdomen). Many women have menstrual cramps just before and during their menstrual periods.
- ❖ Bloating (a condition where your belly feels full and tight, often due to gas)
- ❖ Sore breasts
- ❖ Food craving (a strong desire for a specific food)

If these symptoms are severe, it might be a sign of premenstrual syndrome (PMS) PMS usually occurs a week before menstruation. PMS may affect a girl of any age who has menstrual periods. If the symptoms are severe, you may want to seek medical care.

### Why do some girls or women miss or have irregular periods?

- ❖ Lack of food
- ❖ Excessive exercise
- ❖ Lack of food and excessive exercise cause an increase in stress hormones which prevent the egg being released
- ❖ Age- When girls first start their periods their cycles are very irregular and they can miss periods for many months because it takes some time for the hormones to be released in a regular pattern. As women get into or are nearing menopause, their periods may become irregular and consequently stop.





- ❖ Pregnancy-Hormones produced during pregnancy prevent the egg from being released or the womb from shedding its lining.
- ❖ Breastfeeding - Hormones produced during breastfeeding prevent the egg from being released.
- ❖ Contraceptives -such as contraceptive pill and depot injection contain hormones which affect women's menstrual cycles differently for example, some women get irregular bleeding while others will stop bleeding
- ❖ Emotional stress such as work stress, examination stress. Stress increases certain hormones which can affect the menstrual cycle.

### Why do some girls and women miss their periods yet they are not pregnant or on contraception?

- ❖ The absence of menstruation is called amenorrhea. Well as it is not usually an issue, if it goes on for more than several months, you should talk to your health care professional for medical support and advice.

### How does the body feel during menstruation?

The feelings during menstruation defer from woman to woman or girl to girl and some women or girls will not feel anything. But some women and girls may have the following symptoms;

- ❖ **Physical symptoms** – Cramps, pain, bloating, weight gain, food cravings, swollen or painful breasts, swollen hands or feet, skin problems, headaches, dizziness, or irritability.
- ❖ **Emotional symptoms** – Short temper, aggression, anger, anxiety or panic, confusion, lack of concentration, nervous tension, fatigue, or depression.

As hormone levels rise and fall during a girl's menstrual cycle, the girls or woman can take pain relievers/pain killers, hot water compresses among others for relief from menstrual symptoms. If these do not help, she should visit a health provider and discuss the matter.

### Why do girls need to keep track of their periods and what can a girl or woman do?

- ❖ A girl should keep a record so that she is prepared to handle it. Periods may start at school or when you are outside or anywhere. There is no need to restrict one's movement or routine work because of periods. A girl or woman must carry menstrual protection such as sanitary pads, cotton wools etc and then continue with their regular activities.
- ❖ A girl should also understand their menstrual cycle by understanding their menstrual calendar

### Is menstruation a sign of sickness or disease?

- ❖ No, Menstruation is absolutely a normal process and there is no need to worry about anything. But if the bleeding persists beyond 7 days or the blood flow is extreme, please





visit a health worker.



## Is it okay for a girl or woman to take a bath or shower or do exercises during her periods?

- ❖ Menstruation is a natural and normal part of every girl's life. During your period, you can continue doing everything you normally do, including daily bath or shower, exercising, dancing and playing sports are all fine. In fact, you will feel better by continuing your normal routine, and find that warm bath is a great way to help with any cramping you may have.

## Should a girl or woman eat or drink or sit separately from other family members during her periods?

- ❖ No, it is normal to sit, eat or drink with your family members and friends when you are in your periods. This will reduce period discrimination and stigma.

*Myth: Girls and women in their periods are unclean and should not sit or eat or associate with other people.*

*Fact: Women and girls should associate with their family, friends without any fears or discrimination. All they need to do is to ensure proper menstrual hygiene management.*

## Are girls unclean or impure during their periods?

- ❖ The blood that is shed during menstruation is not impure blood. This is actually the shedding of the lining of the uterus which is thickened during the cycle in anticipation of a fertilized egg. That is why the periods are also referred to as "tears of the womb". There is no impurity in the blood associated with menstruation. Cleanliness and hygiene are related to the management of menstrual flow. Good hygiene practices like bathing, washing of genital areas, periodic change of pads help maintain cleanliness and keep away any odour.

## Menstrual hygiene and managing menstruation

Managing menstruation is the process of being self-aware of one's menstrual cycle and being able to manage the blood flow by maintaining appropriate hygiene standards using safe hygiene materials and products so that one continues with their day to day or routine activities. Girls and women need change their sanitary napkins regularly during their periods especially in the first two to three days.

This section presents a question-and-answer approach and guide for women and girls to ensure they effectively manage their menstruation by adopting the most effective menstrual hygiene standards and products.;

**Challenges for rural women and girls:** The majority of girls especially in rural areas use cloth pads usually torn from old sofas, mattresses etc, instead of sanitary pads/ towels/napkin. These cloth pads are washed and used several times. There is no private place to change and clean them and often no safe water and soap to wash them properly. A culture of shame and embarrassment forces them to seek for well-hidden places





even in their homes to dry these clothes. These places are often damp, dark and unhealthy. This practice is responsible for a significant proportion of illness and infection associated with female reproductive health. Very often serious infections are left untreated. There is need to ensure the girls use appropriate clean places with proper lighting to prevent any infections.

### What products do girls and women use during menstruation?

- ❖ Pads or sanitary napkins: These are designed to fit the panty area close to the body and strips of tape keep them attached to the panties, and the panties help to hold the pads close to the opening of the vagina. These are used once and then disposed off by throwing them in a pit latrine, burying them, or burning them after use. They should not be left in the garbage pile or flushed down the toilet, as they will cause blockage. However, these can be unaffordable to many girls in rural areas living in extreme poverty.
- ❖ **Clean cloth:** These are cut to fit in the panty area by sewing several layers of cotton rags on top of each other. These must be clean. They must be washed thoroughly and hung in a private but sunny place to dry. They should not be shared with others.
- ❖ Whatever a girl uses (cloth, toilet tissue, or pads), she should change it frequently to avoid staining and odor. When menstrual blood comes in contact with air, it can develop a stale odor.
- ❖ Soft toilet paper-These are available at low costs compared to sanitary pads
- ❖ Cloth pads-from very soft clothes also work equally well.

### Storage and management or maintenance of menstrual products

- ❖ A girl might be worried that her friends might see her carrying such products with her. She should know that placing these in a simple plastic bag in her purse, school bag, or backpack usually prevents any embarrassment.
- ❖ If a girl's panties or clothes get stained with blood, she can soak them in cool, mildly salty water before washing. Hot water will cause the blood to set and remain as a permanent stain.
- ❖ Never flush a sanitary or cloth pad into the toilet to avoid embarrassment after the plumber discovers what caused the blockage; Instead throw them in a pit latrine.

### What can a girl or a woman do if they suddenly bleed through their clothes?

Well, this can happen to almost all girls or women at one time or another. Just tie a sweater or jacket around your waist to cover any possible stain. (If you don't have a sweater on you, ask a friend to borrow hers. This is what sisterhood and friendship is all about!) Then get yourself a napkin/pad, head to the bathroom and scrub out any noticeable spot. For future reference, you might want to take an extra pair of underwear and pad in your bag and wear dark clothes on days when you're expecting your period or when your flow is at its heaviest.

### How often should a girl or woman in her periods change her pads/napkin or cloth pad?

- ❖ To prevent infections, girls or women need to change their napkins regularly during their periods especially in the first three days. It is advisable that one changes their





napkins/pads/cloth pads every 3-4 hours.

### **Some girls and women while in their periods or just a few days into their periods feel tired, is this normal?**

- ❖ Yes, it is very normal. It is advisable that you rest, relax and regenerate, slow down, rest, eat well. Many girls avoid taking food during this time because of uneasiness. This is not a healthy practice as an empty stomach makes you feel weak further and makes you feel that the bleeding is heavier.

### **How often should a girl or woman have her periods?**

- ❖ Period length varies from girl to girl but 21 to 35 days relatively is normal. A normal regular period is usually about 28 - 32 days long.

### **What should the color of the blood be during my periods?**

- ❖ Blood during menstruation varies based on starting and end of the period. It usually starts off fairly bright red, and then as it slows down turns a browner colour.

### **How does a girl or woman feel during her periods?**

- ❖ Just before and during your period, your body may tend to retain water. This added fluid might make you feel fat or make your breasts feel tender. It is normal to gain a couple of weight during this time of the month towards your periods and lose them after your periods. It is advisable to consume or take less salt immediately before and during your period because salt increases water retention.

### **Is it normal to feel pain during periods?**

- ❖ During menstruation, the uterus contracts, tightens and relaxes so that menstrual blood moves out through the vagina. This process is sometimes painful to some women and girls. Taking pain killers, hot bath and doing exercise can help to reduce this pain but if the pain persists, please visit a health worker.

### **What are cramps during periods?**

- ❖ Cramps are actually uterus contractions. These contractions that sometimes feel like cramps are the body's way of shedding, or getting rid the lining of the uterus ( in form of blood), through the vagina.

### **What can a girl or woman do if they experience cramps?**

- ❖ Do exercise
- ❖ Take a warm bath,
- ❖ Take pain relievers/killers. If there is a lot of pain, long or "heavy" periods (heavy meaning more bleeding than normal)
- ❖ If the pain is too much with excessive bleeding than normal, seek the support of a health worker.





### What napkin or pad is best for use during periods?

- ❖ There is no specific type of pad or napkin! It depends on personal preference and the costs of the pad. Any can work provided it makes you comfortable and you can afford it.

### Most girls fear to buy pads/napkins from the shops, what can they do?

- ❖ Buy napkins as part of your regular monthly provision list that is purchased for the house. You can feel confident enough to ask for a napkin packet from a pharmacy or shop because nobody will ask you where you are taking it after all they are interested in making money by selling those products. You may feel doubly embarrassed if you go to purchase the pad when you have the periods, so purchase it before you get into your periods.

### How do you carry my napkins or pads from the shop or pharmacy?

- ❖ Wrap the napkin packets in newspapers/ paper covers.
- ❖ Carry non-transparent and convenient bags for such purchase.
- ❖ Nobody needs to know what you have bought.
- ❖ Don't feel embarrassed; feel confident and relaxed like you make any other purchase to avoid any undue teasing and bullying.

### Do girls or women need to use soap or deodorants to clean up during their periods?

- ❖ The normal body fluids don't expose a girl to any harm as long as they are removed before bacteria that are normally present are able to reproduce, resulting in infection and odor. Special soaps or deodorants are not necessary to clean. All one needs to use to wash and clean is plain water and mild soap. Special hygiene products, deodorants and chemicals can cause risks of infections when used inside the vagina and are not required to remove bad odour nor do they have any additional benefits.

### Does a girl need to take leave from her routine job?

Periods happen monthly and so taking leave every month may jeopardize your ability to deliver at your work. So, there is no need to take leave from work. All that needs to be done is to ensure you are prepared to handle menstruation and ensure proper hygiene during the process. This can include ensuring you carry pads and other materials you need each time you anticipate you may start your periods.

### What should a woman or a girl in menstruation eat or not eat?

During menstruation, girls suffer from loss of appetite. Not eating or taking less food or less than normal diet weakens the body more. Therefore, the following eating habits are recommended to ensure the girls remain healthy during and after their periods;

- ❖ Cut down on salt uptake during your period to reduce bloating and fluid retention.





- ❖ Cut down on caffeine to feel less tense and irritable.
- ❖ Eat foods that are high in calcium because calcium has been shown to help alleviate some of the symptoms associated with PMS.
- ❖ Take a moderate amount of exercise.
- ❖ Take iron rich food to compensate for the blood loss and prevent anemia.
- ❖ Take citrus fruits or vegetables before taking iron rich food.
- ❖ Avoid caffeine and tannin which decreases iron absorption by the body.
- ❖ Eat a balanced diet with lots of fresh fruits and vegetables.
- ❖ Keep to a regular sleeping schedule, consistent sleep and wake times can help control excessive fatigue or insomnia.
- ❖ Above all a brisk walk that helps in the release of endorphins (chemicals in the body that make one feel good) or a warm bath are suggested to keep fresh and relieved.

## General Menstrual hygiene practices

The following are some of the general menstrual hygiene mechanisms;

- ❖ Remember to take napkins/pads whenever going out.
- ❖ Wash the genital area after each use of the toilet and after urination.
- ❖ Keep the area between the legs dry otherwise soreness and chaffing may develop
- ❖ Change napkins regularly.
- ❖ Some amount of body odour is natural but regular bathing, washing and changing of napkins will ensure that it is not noticeable.
- ❖ Menstruation is a periodic event and therefore dealing with it hygienically is essential to prevent any reproductive tract infections and urinary tract infections.

## Myths, misconceptions and facts on menstruation

*Myth 1: When a girl starts menstruating, she has become old enough to bear children*

*Fact: Young women need to be supported to avoid getting pregnant early because early pregnancy can cause school dropouts, maternal death because their body is not mature enough to carry a baby. Girls should not be forced to get married but they should have a right to get married at a later stage when they need to do so in their adult age when they are 18 years and above.*

*Myth 2: Menstruation is dirty:*

*Fact: The menstruation blood is not dirty and it comes from the uterus linings and if the egg is fertilized, it becomes a placenta to feed the baby.*





*Myth 3: There are “safe days” during a woman’s menstrual cycle during which the woman can have unprotected sex and not get pregnant.*

*Fact: There are certain times/days in the menstrual cycle when a woman is less likely to get pregnant even if they have un protected sex but it is still possible.*

*Myth 4: Sex during menstruation is harmful*

*Fact: Sex during menstruation does not cause any harm but the couple can decide whether or not to have sex during menstruation-it is totally up to their choice.*

*Myth 5: Menstrual products such as sanitary pads can take away virginity.*

*Fact 5: Losing virginity usually refers to a first sexual encounter. Using a tampon or menstrual cup would not usually be considered a sexual encounter.*

*Myth 6: Sex can cure period pain*

*Fact: Sex can relieve pain but it is not a long-term solution. There are a range of simple and effective measures for relieving pain. Ask a health worker for support.*

*Myth 6: Menstrual products that are inserted into the vagina can take away a girl’s virginity: Fact: Losing virginity means the first sexual encounter. Using a pad or inserting a pad is not a sexual encounter.*

## Conclusion

Menstruation is a natural and normal body function that takes place in women and girls monthly. Therefore, girls and women should be equipped with knowledge and skills for proper hygiene practices so that they feel confident about dealing with it. Women and girls need to also understand the myth, misconceptions and facts about menstruation so that they do not face the health and social effects of such myths. We believe this handbook will be used as a tool to guide women and girls as well as Period Equality Network Members to discuss menstruation to create an awareness on the menstrual process and hygienic management. The handbook can be used by trainers, women mentors, girls, peers, women ambassadors, community-based organizations, health workers among others to provide information on menstruation and menstrual hygiene management to women and girls especially adolescents.

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