

Myths Vs. Facts: Menstrual Cycles

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A first period story. Every woman remembers her first period like it was yesterday. For some, it may be frightening. For others, it may be exciting as a first period marks the start of womanhood for some. Since the dawn of time, women have been bleeding. Even though over half of the world's population experiences a menstrual cycle, there are so many misconceptions. Some of these misconceptions are that periods sync, they're a taboo topic, men shouldn't be taught about them, and that they aren't as painful as women say they are. Periods are a part of life that everyone should know about.

Let's begin by going over what a menstrual cycle is. *TED-Ed* released a video by Emma Bryce (2016) titled "*How Menstruation Works*" on YouTube. The average menstrual cycle lasts about 28 days. Once a month, the ovaries release an unfertilized egg. This happens about 10 to 16 days before a period begins. The unfertilized egg travels out of the ovary and into the fallopian tube. If the egg is fertilized by a sperm cell within 24 hours, a pregnancy will occur. During this time, a hormone called progesterone is released. This hormone signals the lining of the uterus to plump up with blood and nutrients in preparation for a fertilized egg. If there is no fertilized egg, the blood and tissue that was lining the uterus begins to shed. The shedding of the blood is what we call a period. There are many choices to deal with period blood such as pads, tampons, menstrual cups, period underwear, to name a few. The one you use depends on your preferences and what works best for you. Every person is unique, just like every period is unique.

There is one big myth about menstrual cycles that may come as a shock to people. Periods don't sync up. It is a commonly held belief that your period will sync up with the women around you. That means that you would get your period around the same time as your mother, sisters, close friends, and any other women you are around. According to Becca Bernstein (2021)

from Period Education Project, this is known as the McClintok effect. McClintok was a college student in the 1970s that did a study on 135 students living in her dorm. “McClintock proposed that when two menstruators were around each other a lot, their pheromones (which are chemical signals released by the body) would communicate and adjust their periods to make them happen at the same time” (Bernstein, 2021). Since then, research has proved that the McClintok effect doesn’t really happen. But why is this belief so commonly held, even though it has been disproven? Mama Doctor Jones (2021), an OBY-YN and YouTuber, puts it nicely. One reason why people believe this is because it’s kind of cool that periods sync. Jones also says that if you have a bunch of people who menstruate, “at some point, you’re going to have overlap in those cycles.” “Menstruating at the same time as a friend or a loved one can feel like a powerful thing. It can be tempting to think it’s more than coincidence...” (Bernstein, 2021). The thought that periods sync up makes women feel less alone. They’re going through the toughest week of the month together with the people closest to them.

Periods are tough for every woman, but they can be even worse for some women around the world. Many cultures around the world view periods as a taboo topic. It’s something women are taught to be ashamed of. Not only is this view wrong, but it’s also harmful to girls around the world. In an article for *USA for UNFPA*, a United Nations sexual and reproductive health and rights agency, Dana Kirkegaard talks about how period taboos affect women around the world. “To avoid being teased or humiliated, many girls stay home from work or school. Girls who stay home four days out of every month for their period miss over a month of school each year (Kirkegaard, 2014).” Missing school puts them behind their classmates. Education is too important for girls to be missing out because of stigmas. This isn’t only an issue in third world countries. “In Western countries too, the taboo and the invisibility of periods persist. It is not

normal that today, 44% of French women and 58% of Americans feel ashamed during their period (CARE International, 2021)” According to Dr. Sarika Arora, MD from Women’s Health Network, menstrual cycles reflect how balanced your body systems are. “This is because every month your periods are the result of a coordinated conversation between your brain and your ovaries.... A woman’s periods, or irregular periods, are often the first area to show signs of disrupted signaling along these pathways, with implications that are felt throughout the body.” Having a regular menstrual cycle is normal, healthy, and nothing to be ashamed of.

Part of what makes periods such a taboo topic is the belief that periods should only be a topic for women. Men don’t need to concern themselves with women’s issues. It’s not their problem... right? Wrong, wrong, wrong. *The Guardian* released an article by Amika George (2019) stating that one in five young women in the UK have been bullied for their periods. “Encouraging the next generation to view periods as a natural physical process, rather than a source of shame and embarrassment, is vital to build a more equal society” (George, 2019). Just because someone doesn’t menstruate, doesn’t mean they shouldn’t learn about it. Boys grow up with their mothers and sisters. Some men get married and have a wife. Some men are fathers to daughters. Why would you not know about a struggle that the people in your life go through? Men can do simple things to show their love and care for the women in their lives. They can help with chores or tasks, buy our favorite snacks, they can give us time to rest, give us time to work out our feelings. Simple things like that can go a long way. If everyone understood periods, stigmas would be reduced. It could even bring an end to the tampon tax. According to *Alliance for Period Products*, “The tampon tax (or tax on period products) refers to the sales tax rate that a state, county, and/or city government collects on the retail purchase of menstrual products. Too often period products are taxed as luxury items and not recognized as basic necessities.” If

society understood that periods are natural, menstrual products would be seen as necessities, not luxuries.

Lastly, one myth that gets thrown around is that periods aren't that painful. Women are overreacting. Some of the period symptoms that women endure every month include bloating, lower back pain, food cravings, mood swings, headaches, fatigue and more. But we can't forget cramps. Menstrual cramps are different for everyone. Some people don't get cramps. Some people have cramps that hurt, but they can get through them. Some people have cramps that are so bad that it hurts to move. “‘Dysmenorrhea’ is the medical term for painful periods (menstruation) or menstrual cramps. In addition to cramping, you might have other symptoms, such as nausea, fatigue and diarrhea” (Cleveland Clinic, 2023). There's also PMS. “PMS stands for premenstrual syndrome – the emotional and physical symptoms that some people feel right before and during their periods. PMS is caused by the hormonal changes that your body goes through during your menstrual cycle” (Planned Parenthood). Saying women are overreacting is rude and it minimizes their struggles. Understanding the pain and misery women go through every month helps our world to be a more sympathetic and understanding place.

Periods are a normal and natural thing that women go through. My mother had taught me about periods long before I started menstruating. When my first period happened, I was still a little confused and scared. I can't imagine what it would be like for other little girls who weren't educated about the changes their body would go through. It's about time that of all the myths and stigmas surrounding periods go away. Periods are a part of life. Let them be embraced.