

sharing simple facts

useful information
about menstrual health
and hygiene



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menstrual health and hygiene*

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Foreword

This guidance booklet on Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) is intended for adolescent girls and young women. Issues associated with menstruation are never discussed openly and the silence surrounding menstruation burdens young girls by keeping them ignorant of this biological function. Even after the attainment of menarche, very little information is given to young girls about the physiological processes involved and the hygienic practices to be followed.

This booklet provides information on how to handle menstruation, improve their knowledge of personal hygiene and boost their confidence by answering their unanswered questions. It also provides information on the facts, myths and taboos surrounding this issue. It is a compulsory read for adolescent girls and women, equally for facilitators, teachers and peer educators.

Overall the absence of MHM in the policy debate and hence in investments and action, is striking. This points to a glaring need to highlight this issue in the policy debate together with practical work on what adolescent girls and women require to manage their menstrual needs in terms of materials,

education and facilities for management and disposal. Gender sensitivity in health, hygiene and sanitation needs of women and adolescent girls is a critical input required to be integrated in the Government of India's Total Sanitation Campaign, the National Rural Health Mission, Kishori Shakti Yojana and other such programmes. A coordinated effort will reach many more women and it is hoped that this book on "Menstrual Hygiene Management" will be utilized by all agencies concerned with women welfare and empowerment issues.

Place: New Delhi
Date: February 27, 2008



(Santha Sheela Nair)

Preface

Menstrual Hygiene is an issue that every girl and woman has to deal with once she enters adolescence around the age of 12 and until she reaches the menopause somewhere in her 40's. Overall, a woman spends approximately 2,100 days menstruating which is equivalent to almost six years of her life. Menstruation is a monthly occurrence that requires access to appropriate materials and facilities, without which, females suffer from poor menstrual hygiene which restricts their movement and self confidence. Good menstrual hygiene is therefore crucial for the health, education and dignity of girls and women.

Most girls will have their first period, known as menarche between the age of 11 and 14, during a time when they are living through one of the most rapid phase of their physical development. Unfortunately, the taboo surrounding menstruation in society prevents girls and women from articulating their needs and the problems of poor menstrual hygiene management have been ignored or misunderstood. There is lack of information on the process of menstruation, the physical and psychological changes associated with puberty and proper requirements for managing menstruation.

There is a need to change family and community norms and beliefs in this regard. Fortunately, there are some good examples in the form of initiatives with NGO's, Self Help Groups and schools in Tamil Nadu, South India, have empowered girls and women with knowledge, sanitary materials and disposal facilities to handle their "period" properly and have inspired groups from other states to take up similar actions. Girls and young people have a right to know about so many issues which touch them directly or indirectly, now or later. Understanding how to manage hygiene during menstruation is definitely one of the most essential ones for girls.

This easy to read booklet is in a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) form has been prepared to support girls and women in providing basic factual information about menstruation and hygienic menstruation management and will clarify some of the myths and taboos centered around this issue. We hope the booklet serves as a self reference for adolescent girls and will help them to be better prepared to cope with the physical and changes in their bodies and practice safe and hygienic ways of dealing with menstruation.

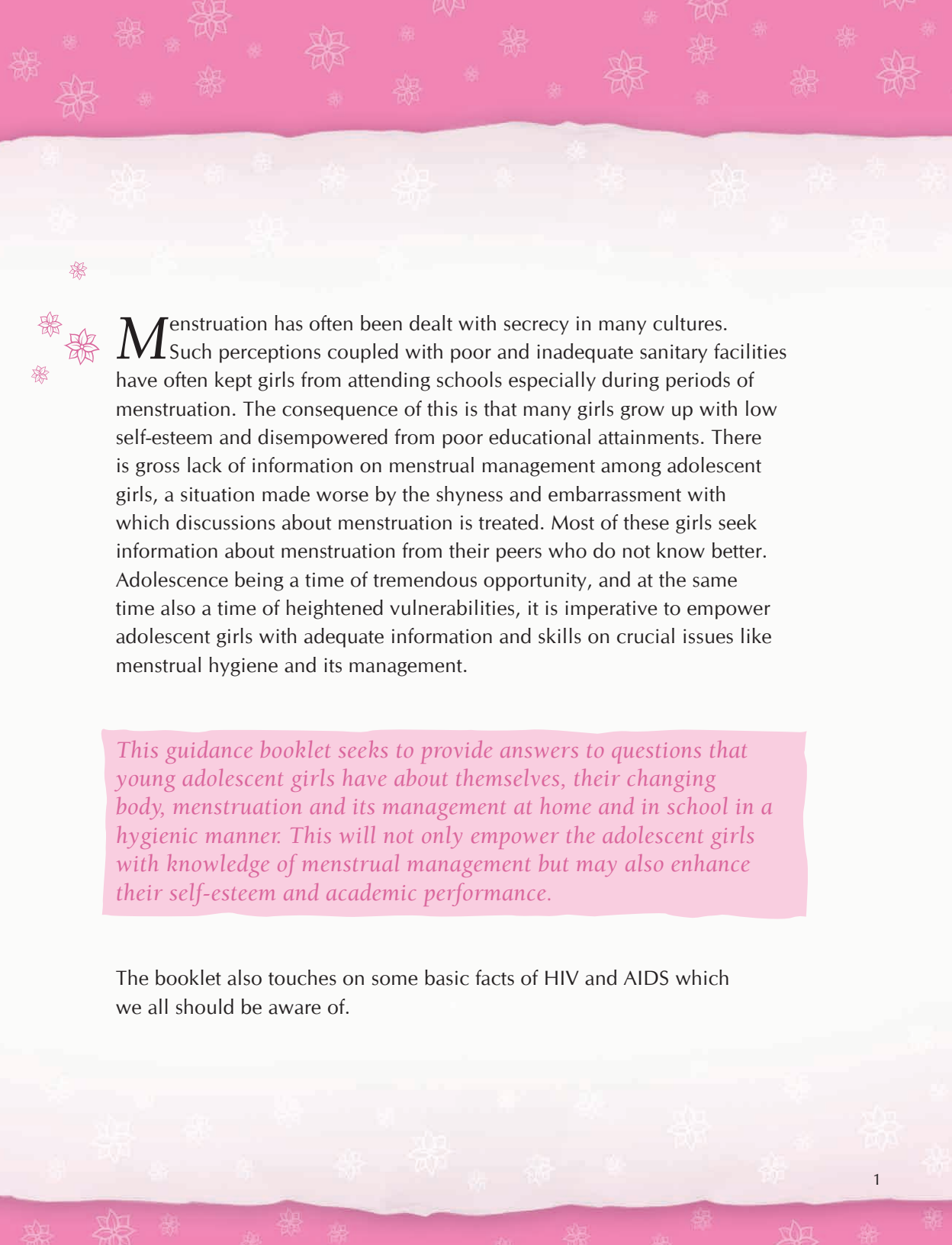
The booklet, which will be translated into Hindi and other Indian languages, will also help parents and teachers to understand and appreciate the requirements for hygienic management of menstruation at homes, in schools and the community.



Lizette Burgers
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Menstruation has often been dealt with secrecy in many cultures. Such perceptions coupled with poor and inadequate sanitary facilities have often kept girls from attending schools especially during periods of menstruation. The consequence of this is that many girls grow up with low self-esteem and disempowered from poor educational attainments. There is gross lack of information on menstrual management among adolescent girls, a situation made worse by the shyness and embarrassment with which discussions about menstruation is treated. Most of these girls seek information about menstruation from their peers who do not know better. Adolescence being a time of tremendous opportunity, and at the same time also a time of heightened vulnerabilities, it is imperative to empower adolescent girls with adequate information and skills on crucial issues like menstrual hygiene and its management.

This guidance booklet seeks to provide answers to questions that young adolescent girls have about themselves, their changing body, menstruation and its management at home and in school in a hygienic manner. This will not only empower the adolescent girls with knowledge of menstrual management but may also enhance their self-esteem and academic performance.

The booklet also touches on some basic facts of HIV and AIDS which we all should be aware of.

Growing up – the normal way

This section helps young girls understand their maturing bodies and know the physical and emotional changes during puberty. Helping young girls understand their body dispels myths and misconceptions about reproductive health and makes them better prepared for adulthood.

Girls begin to menstruate anytime between nine and fourteen years. Menarche (first menstruation) and menstruation are normal physiological processes that occur once puberty sets in. Girls who are aware what menstruation is and how to deal with it cope with it much better than those who are caught unawares. Preparedness gives girls the power to handle it in a mature way and also feel confident that there would be no embarrassment resulting from these intensely private moments.

Many girls feel that menstruation is a secretive and unclean process so there is need to stay indoors and out of sight. In reality, there is nothing

unclean or shameful about the process. Though it is not required to go public about it, one can continue their regular normal routine. Others need not know about your periods unless one chooses to reveal the information. If proper hygiene practices are followed along with sufficient protection to absorb the menstrual flow one can be relaxed and continue with her regular routine. Confident and hygienic management of menstrual cycles helps in overcoming any embarrassment.

Some of the answers in this note may be the unanswered questions that you have had, so read carefully and feel confident that you are the same person before and after menarche!!



What is puberty? Why does it happen?

Puberty is the name given to changes that occur in girls and boys as they grow up. Most girls and boys begin to notice these changes taking place to their bodies between the ages of 10 and 14. These changes take place over a number of years and also include emotional changes. While puberty is known to be a teenage process, in actuality the internal changes begin much earlier – at about age 8 for girls and age 11 for boys.



What are the physical changes that happen during puberty/adolescence?

The major changes associated with adolescence in girls may vary in time but they follow a pattern. These changes are:

- Breast development which starts between the ages of 8 - 13 years. One breast may grow faster than the other. Any difference in the size of breasts should not worry young girls because by the time the development is complete, there is no difference.
- Growth of bony pelvis which is widening of hips.
- Growth spurt where girls grow taller. The body starts growing faster at 10-11 years. By 16 years, a girl usually reaches 98% of her height, provided her nutritional requirements are met. Hands and feet grow before the legs and upper arms which can temporarily give a disproportionate appearance to the body.
- Pubic hair – Between the age of 10 to 14, hair begins to grow in the genital area and armpits.
- Menstruation which is the monthly small amount of bleeding which takes place from the vagina and is a normal process.

In addition, adolescents also experience a range of changes that are often related to the hormonal activity in puberty - the emergence of acne, emergence of body odor and mood changes. These are all related to the maturing body, particularly to hormones and sexual development.



Why do many teenagers have skin problems during puberty?

During puberty increased hormonal activity leads to enhanced activity in the skin glands. Oil produced by the glands blocks skin pores and mixes with bacteria to cause pimples or spots. To help keep skin clear, one should wash face and hands frequently.



How long does it take for breasts to be fully developed?

It takes a different amount of time for each girl. If a girl starts later than other girls, it does not mean that her breasts will always be smaller. There is no link between what size breasts will be and when they start to develop.



What are the strategies that girls could adopt to help through puberty?

First, girls should **learn** about the changes. Knowing what to expect or awareness about it and being prepared to deal with those physical changes alleviates the anxiety and confusion that can sometimes result from the rapid changes during this period.

Second, girls should **understand** that the changes are normal, and that there is no shame in what is going on. Though not often discussed, this is all a part of the normal process of development.

Third, they should learn how to **adapt** to the changes. Many of the experiences are new and adolescents need to learn how to properly address the new experiences. While some information might be available from school and friends, parents should address the practical concerns that puberty brings, for instance, new hygiene needs (e.g., menstrual periods, body odors), clothing and product needs (e.g., cloth vs. napkin brands), etc.

Finally, girls should continue to **communicate** in an open and honest manner. Any doubts can be clarified by openly discussing with parents, elder siblings, and elderly relatives. Parents should be supportive and keep the channels of communication open. In schools, teachers should act as guides. So one needs to feel free to approach them and discuss one's doubts.



What are the emotional changes that occur during puberty?

This is the period when the girl is stressed about her appearance and her position 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. Not all girls experience all the symptoms during each of their monthly cycles. It may vary among individuals. There is a change in the inter-personal relationships.

- **Changing emotions** – During puberty, young people might feel overly sensitive or become easily upset. Feeling anxious about how the changing body looks is one of the things young people are most sensitive about. Losing temper more than usual and getting angry with friends or family members happen more easily. It is common to feel sad or depressed sometimes. Young people should talk to adults they trust about any feelings of anger, sadness, or depression they may have.
- **Sexual feelings** – During puberty, it is normal to become more aware of the opposite sex and to feel more sexual. Sexual feelings can come from reading a romantic novel or thinking about a boy or man. Having sexual feelings is normal and is nothing to feel guilty about. Acting on such feelings, however, is a big responsibility, and it is best to wait until one is older.

- **Sense of identity** – The pubertal girl is trying to find out the answer to the question, “Who am I?” Friendships outside the home are developed. The interests of the peer group often become more important than those of the family. There is often a struggle to become more independent of parents and family.
- **Future uncertainty** – Often the pre-teen has no idea what the future holds for her. It is sometimes hard to imagine what she might be doing next week, never mind the rest of her life. Concerns about what the future course of actions would be there in the family is the prime concern of most girls.
- **Peer pressure** – The peer group often sets the standards for appropriate dress, language and behaviour. Often, the behaviour of the peer group is different than that expected by parents of their daughter. These situations can create conflict.
- **Confusion** – Sometimes the pre-teen swings between wanting to be an independent teenager and wanting to be a dependent child. Her body may be physically changing to resemble that of a young adult, but often a young girl may not be emotionally prepared for the passage from childhood to adolescence.
- **Mood swings** – Because of fluctuations in hormone levels, the accompanying physical changes, a changing self-concept, and the usual stress of the pre-teen years, mood swings may occur. Because these mood swings may not have been visible earlier, parents and families of pre-teens have to be more supportive and understanding.
- **Self-consciousness** – Pre-pubertal girls usually develop physically faster than boys. Young girls may be self-conscious about their breasts and menstrual periods. Girls take growth spurts before boys which may cause them to be self-conscious when around shorter boys. 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.



How do girls deal with the changed relationships in the household after menarche?

This is one of the situations that all girls face at the onset of menarche. There occurs a certain type of segregation of sexes and the free mixing that was allowed earlier is not encouraged in many households. However, households with educated parents and with modern outlook seem to be changing these days. Many of these need to be negotiated at the household level and there is need to explain and ensure that these natural processes do not interfere with your continuing education or maintaining good health and hygiene practices.



Why is the onset of menarche (first menstruation) celebrated in some sections?

Menarche signifies the transition of the girl from childhood to adulthood. In cultures/tribes where fertility and procreation are considered great events, menarche symbolizes the beginning of the reproductive phase of the girl. This ritual is normally practiced to intimate that the girl has entered into her fertile period. But in the modern days, such rituals are avoided as this may be an embarrassment for the girl. Moreover, as it has been scientifically proved that marriage and delivery soon after menarche are not good for girl's health, there is a slight shift in the attitude in celebrating this event.



Why is there seclusion during menstrual periods in some communities?

Seclusion is followed by some communities to allow the girl some respite from the heavy burden of household chores. It is the period when she is given time off from her regular chores and domestic responsibilities to take rest. However, in the modern era many households have abandoned this practice. In nuclear families it is difficult to practice seclusion as one has to take care of the individual needs and cannot wait to be attended upon.

Dealing with menstruation

The setting of menarche is often celebrated in many cultures and during this period there is a tradition of preparing and giving food rich in iron and protein content. Modernization has seen the cessation of this practice of celebration to a certain extent but many households still follow the practice of providing the nutritional supplementation during menarche. The practice of seclusion and keeping them from regular routines that is visible during menstrual cycles in India was mainly to ensure that the girl does not undergo strain during that period due to the burden of heavy household chores. With modernization and easier access to products for managing menstrual flow, this seclusion is not practiced in many families, although some families are still following it. However, visiting places of worship is still avoided by most.

Preparing for menarche (beginning of menstruation)

Girls explain that menstruation is a taboo subject even within their own families. There is an unspoken 'culture of silence' with regard to their menstruation. They find difficult to discuss menstrual issues with their mothers and certainly not with their fathers. Not being able to talk about their experience and having limited information means that menstruation becomes something to be ashamed of and to

hide, and is consequently ignored in families, schools and communities. In many families, the mother has limited experience in explaining the management of menstruation with regard to schooling, mobility or outdoor activities. This section tries to address the gaps in facts with respect to menstruation for dealing with it confidently. Menstruation is a normal process of the body and if proper knowledge is given regarding its onset, management and problems associated with it; then it can be handled like all other body functions.



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 girl/woman's "period." It usually lasts between three and seven days. Menstruation happens for most girls about once a month. It is a sign that a girl can now become pregnant. Women stop menstruating during pregnancy but then start again after delivery.



At what age does a girl start menstruating?

Just as some girls begin puberty earlier or later than others, the same applies to periods. Some girls may begin to menstruate as early as age nine or 10, 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.



How does a girl know when her first period is about to start?

No one can be sure exactly when this will happen. Most girls begin menstruating between the ages of 11 and 14. The best way a girl can know is to look for signs. Underarm hair and a whitish discharge from the vagina are signs that the menarche probably is not too far away.



Girls are scared about getting their periods. Does it 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.



What should a girl do when she gets 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. Your teachers, family members, and close relatives are there to support you and to provide directions on what products to use to absorb the menstrual flow.



How much flow is there normally?

The menstrual flow – meaning how much blood comes out of the vagina – can vary widely from person to person. Usually, an entire period consists of a few to several spoonfuls of blood – 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 happens during menstruation?

Girls have thousands of tiny eggs in their ovaries even at the time of birth. Each month, or approximately every 21 - 35 days, on average, one of the eggs leaves an ovary and travels through a fallopian tube. When the egg leaves the ovary, this is 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 and is 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 pregnancy?

Pregnancy is fertilization of the sperm and the egg to form a baby. The egg from the female meets with the sperm during sexual contact- intercourse and the egg becomes fertilized. The fertilized egg moves through the fallopian tubes and settles in the uterus where it undergoes cell development into a fetus or the baby. After a nine month gestation period or stay in the uterus, the baby becomes fully developed to be delivered.



How long should a girl's period last?

Because all girls are different, 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.



What if a girl's period never starts?

Periods will start sooner or later. However, if a girl reaches age 16 and has not yet had her first period, she should visit a health provider/doctor.



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, the cycle is as short as 21 (or even fewer) days. For others, it is as long as 35 days or more. Irregular periods are common in girls who are just beginning to menstruate. It may take the body a while to adjust to all the changes taking place. For example, a girl may have the same length cycle for two months, then miss

a month, or have two periods with fewer days in between them. Sometimes she might have some spotting of blood for a day or two in the middle of her cycle. This is usually nothing to worry about, till the cycle regularizes.



What defines normal menstruation?

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 some sort of white or yellow discharge in between the 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 tell when a girl has her period?

No. Unless she tells someone, it is her private secret. When she gets her first period, she should tell her mother (or sister or another adult she trusts). That way, there will be somebody to answer questions she might have.



Are there any foods to avoid during a period?

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 for menstruation on a regular basis

Menarche symbolizes the start of the menstrual cycle. Once it becomes a regular feature, it is better to keep track of the time of the month when it is likely to occur. Preparedness to the menstrual process avoids any embarrassment associated with staining/soiling of clothes and in general creates a sense of confidence in dealing with the physiological process. You should adopt a method of menstrual hygiene with which you are at ease. A method that will allow you to participate in life during your periods, that is to go to school, to move and run, to work and to learn and to be with your family and friends as at any other time.

Learning to take care of your personal hygiene during menstruation, gives you the freedom to stay active. You can continue going to school, being with friends, shopping, helping with household chores, and participating in sports in school or college. As far as your activities permit, you might prefer to wear any comfortable clothing.

Soon after menarche and for some years later, the girl has irregular cycles; the cycles do even out and start following a periodic rhythm of its own. It would be a good exercise to keep track of your body cycles and rhythms as this is the first step to its proper management. The safest way to be prepared for a period is carrying a sanitary napkin with you when you go out for long hours and even to school.



What is the sign that 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. It comes out

slowly. Usually 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 napkin or other protection to prevent the blood from staining her clothes.



What are the other signs of menstruation?

Bleeding from the vagina is the primary sign of menstruation. Some girls have other symptoms around the time of menstruation, including:

- Cramping, bloating, and sore breasts.
- Food cravings.
- Mood swings and irritability.
- Headache and fatigue.

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.



What if a girl's period stops but she is sure she is not pregnant?

The absence of menstruation is called amenorrhea. This is not usually a major concern, but if it goes on for more than several months, you should talk to your health care professional about possible reasons. Some female athletes develop amenorrhea when their ratio of body fat to overall weight drops too low.



Why are periods irregular?

Once a girl starts getting her period; it will probably take several months to a year for the menstrual cycle to settle into a regular pattern. During this time,

hormone levels change and ovulation does not necessarily occur on a regular basis. So, the interval between periods, the amount of menstrual flow, and the duration of the period are likely to vary considerably from cycle to cycle. Girls may be concerned about differences between their cycle and that of their friends. They may worry if, after their first period, they do not menstruate again for two to three months, but these are normal variations.



How does the body feel during menstruation?

Sometimes a girl may experience physical or emotional changes around the time of her period. Not everyone has these feelings – some girls do not feel anything. A girl may experience some of these:

- **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, they can affect the way she feels, both physically and emotionally. She may find that taking pain relievers, hot water compresses, herbal teas, or other local remedies can give her 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? How does one normally do it?

A girl should keep a record so that she is prepared to handle it. Periods may start at school or when you are outside. There is no need to restrict

one's mobility because of impending periods. If you carry menstrual protection, then regular activities can continue.

The record is a *confidential* track of one's cycles. This is just to give a sense of security of being prepared for the periods and to avoid embarrassment. The girls can mark the day that their period starts with a large "X" and then mark every day that there is bleeding with a *small* "x."

Sample Menstrual Cycle Calendar – January, suppose the period begins on 10th. In February, if periods start on the 5th, the cycle 1 gets counted as 26 days.

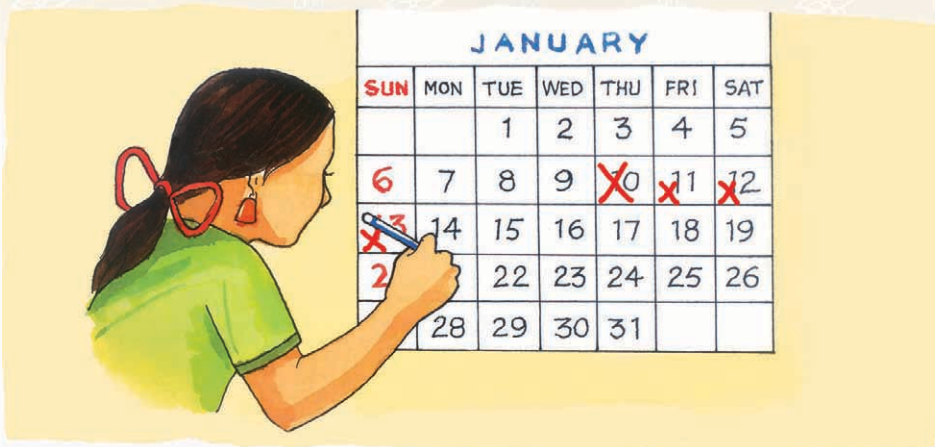
The girls have to calculate the length of their cycle each month. This means counting the number of days between the first day of their period to the day before they get their next period. Observe the number of days in their short cycles and in their long cycles add up each cycle length and divide by the number of cycles to get the average length of their cycles for the year. Many girls have irregular periods when they first begin menstruating, and if they miss a month, it does not necessarily mean there is a problem.

The following is a sample calculation based on nine cycles:

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10 X	11 x	12 x
13 x	14 x	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

Cycle 1	26
Cycle 2	28
Cycle 3	33
Cycle 4	31
Cycle 5	33

Cycle 6	28
Cycle 7	29
Cycle 8	29
Cycle 9	28
Average	29



Can girls take a bath or shower during their periods? What about exercising?

Menstruation is a very normal part of every girl's life. During your period, you can do 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.

Myth: Taking bath during periods pollutes the environment

FACT: In the ancient days, people used to bathe in water sources like the river, pond, lakes etc. These were public places and when they took a bath in them there could be causes for embarrassment. So it was advised that girls desist from taking bath during the is period. However, now times have changed and we have the privacy of a bathroom or a seperate place to bathe. It is advisable to take bath at least once a day in luke warm water to keep the body clean and avoid bad odour.



Are periods some kind of disease?

This is an absolutely normal process and not an illness. It is medically safe to do anything that you normally do during menstruation.



Is it risky and dangerous to engage in sports and playing games during menstruation?

As already mentioned, it is medically safe to do anything that one normally does, however some girls may feel tired or get cramps which may restrict such activities. One may want to rest more than normal during this period, though this varies from person to person.



Should one eat separately from family members while having periods?

There is no reason for a girl/woman to eat separately while having her periods.



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 endometrium 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.

Managing menstruation

Managing menstruation is essentially dealing with menstrual flow and also in continuing regular activities like going to school, working etc. Once the girl feels confident about the first part of managing that is – managing the menstrual flow, then the latter part is no problem at all. One sees that girls often cease to perform their regular activities due to the embarrassment associated with managing the menstrual flow.

Girls need to change their sanitary napkins regularly during the period of menstruation especially in the first two to three days. The vast majority of girls use cloth pads usually torn from old saris, instead of sanitary 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.

Menstruation as a regular process needs hygienic management.



What products do girls usually use during menstruation?

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.

Pads or sanitary napkins: These are designed to fit the panty area close to the body. Strips of tape keep them attached to the panties, and the panties help to hold the pads close to the opening of the vagina. Sanitary napkins manufactured by multinational companies like Stayfree, Carefree, Whisper, Kotex are available in the market. In the recent times, SHGs have also started manufacturing sterile, low cost sanitary napkins which can be purchased locally even at the village level. Women SHG members themselves sell these products and so adolescents and rural girls may feel comfortable purchasing them. Pads have a plastic lining to minimize the spill of blood. If a girl uses pads, she needs to throw them down a pit latrine, bury them, or burn them after use. They should not be left in the garbage pile or flushed down the toilet, as they will cause blockage.

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. Pads cost more than toilet paper and cloth pads, but all work equally well. A girl can usually ask her sister, mother, or other close female relative what she uses. 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.



What are sanitary napkins and how do they work?

Sanitary napkins come in different shapes, styles, absorbencies for light and heavy days of menstrual bleeding. Some sanitary napkins, pads are made with removable strips of paper that reveal adhesive tape that is made to stick to your panties. Other pads have wrap-around “wings” that wrap under your panties to keep it from moving or “bunching.” Some may prefer the belt model where the napkin is held using the belt.



What if a girl suddenly bleeds through her clothes?

Well, it happens to almost all of us 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 is all about!) Then get yourself a napkin/pad, head to the bathroom, do what you have to do 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 napkins or cloth pads be changed?

Menstruation as a regular process needs hygienic management. Girls need to change their napkins regularly during the period of menstruation especially in the first three days. This can help prevent infections. During the heaviest days of your period, you may need to change them every 3-4 hours. Given below is a pictorial representation of the normal timings to change pads.



It is very common for girls to use two or three pads or multiple layers of cloth pads if they have heavy flow or if they know that they cannot change the pad for longer time. In cases where cloth napkins are used, they need to be washed properly and dried under the sun for killing germs and bacteria that may be present.

** Never flush a sanitary or cloth pad down the toilet as this may cause serious plumbing problems as well as serious embarrassment after the plumber discovers what caused the problem!*



Sometimes when a girl has her period, even a few days into it, she feels very tired. Is this a normal period symptom?

Yes it is very normal. Period time is a time to rest, relax and regenerate. Slowing down and resting up before your period, eating well; taking time out to pamper yourself will reduce your discomfort during your period. 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 is a women supposed to have her period? What colour is the blood in your period supposed to be? Is it supposed to be red or brown?

A normal regular period is usually about 28 - 32 days long. Period length varies from girl to girl (21 to 35 days also) and this is perfectly normal. Blood colour does vary, it usually starts off fairly bright red, and then as it slows down turns a browner colour. If the cycle is regular and there is only little discomfort then it's probably ok. Blood colour and flow rate can also vary from cycle to cycle.



How much blood does a girl normally lose during a period?

It varies a lot. For most women, it's around four tablespoons, but for some, it's as much as a cup. (If you're bleeding more than that, soaking pad after pad all day long, see your doctor.) Sometimes the blood is red, sometimes it's brown, sometimes it's streaky, and sometimes it's got some darker bits in it. Variety is normal. Every girl is different.



Why does a girl feel fat 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. Actually, it's normal to gain a couple of pounds during this time of the month – and lose them right after your period. If you feel bloated, you may feel better wearing loose, comfortable clothing. Consume less salt immediately before and during your period because salt increases water retention.



What causes period pain?

During a period, the uterus contracts, tightening and relaxing so that the menstrual flow empties from the body. This process for some is painful. Some girls get cramps that are more severe than others. Pain relievers, exercise, a hot bath, or a heat compress can help this.



What about cramps?

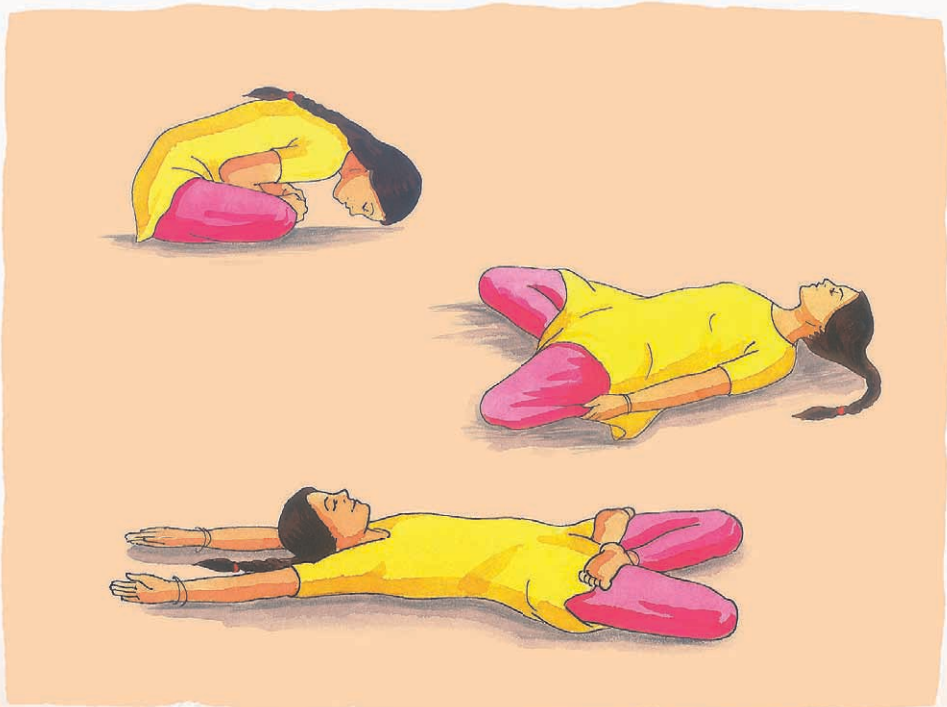
Some girls have cramps during their periods. Cramps are actually uterus' contractions. The uterus, which is like a pear-shaped muscle, helps get rid of the endometrium, or lining of the uterus. These contractions that sometimes feel like cramps are the body's way of shedding, or getting rid

the lining of the uterus, through the vagina, and out of the body, as the lining is no longer needed that cycle.



What can a girl do to help with cramps?

Cramps are usually mild. They can be helped by exercise, warm bath, and use of a heating pad or pain relievers. If there is a lot of pain, long or “heavy” periods (heavy meaning more bleeding than normal), which means saturating a tampon or pad in less than 2-3 hours, or if you have irregular periods, you should inform your parents and ask them to take you to your doctor for a checkup. You can also try yoga or some relieving exercises, as shown below.





What pads are best for girls?

Choosing the “right” pad is really a personal preference, and not determined by age. Many girls do prefer to use thin or ultra thin pads because they’re thinner and more discreet than thick ones. They may prefer the wings variety with super absorbent gel too.



How do we make cloth menstrual pads?

Here’s an easy and less expensive way to make your own pad - without sewing at all! Simply take any cloth that is clean and dry. The cloth can be made into a pad, by simply folding it in half, then half again - both length-wise. You should have a long narrow pad now. Place it in the centre of your panties, and you are all set - cloth against cloth doesn’t move. For more absorbency, simply fold two cloths together. For waterproof protection, you can cut 3” by 12” (8 cm by 30 cm) strips of a rubberized flannelette change pad. To wash, simply rinse out, and wash properly, no special care needed. Drying should be in the sun.



Should girls use only napkins? They are expensive?

All napkins are not expensive. Some of the napkins manufactured by the SHGs are quite affordable. However, it is quite possible that some of you cannot afford a napkin, in that case it is better to use cloth napkins for managing the flow. It is however, advisable to wash the napkins regularly after each use and then to dry them in sunlight. Sunlight is a natural sterilizer and drying the cloth pads on sunlight sterilizes them for future use. They also need to be stored in a clean dry place for reuse. If these precautions are taken, then feel free to use the cloth. REMEMBER, HYGIENE OF THE NAPKIN IS THE CRITICAL THING.



What are the care and washing instructions?

Wash your pads before their first use if it is a new cloth- this increases absorbency. However, many of you may use old saris or clothes. Always ensure that they are clean before use. After use, separate the two parts, soak them in cool water and rinse. Then wash as usual. Hang to dry. Iron if you want. Then they are ready to go again!! If you soak them in cool water you will find staining to be minimal or nil.



Girls sometimes feel embarrassed to get a napkin packet from the local store, so they use cloth. How does one really get around this problem?

You can order the napkin packet with the regular monthly provision list that is purchased for the house. If there is a medical shop, you can feel confident to ask them for a napkin packet. You may feel doubly embarrassed if you go to purchase the pad when you have the periods, so purchase it before hand. In the case of departmental stores having self service, picking one by yourself is a smart choice!



How does a girl carry a napkin packet home? Many of them feel so embarrassed?

Normally in the local shops, they wrap the napkin packets in newspapers/ paper covers. You can carry non-transparent, 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. This will avoid any undue teasing.

Managing menstruation in school

In many developing countries including India, the onset of puberty results in significant changes in school participation for girls. Starting to menstruate and thus entering fertile age affects girls' socialization with family and community and often has a significant impact on their education. Across the developing world poor and inadequate sanitation facilities prevent girls from attending school, particularly when they are menstruating. Of the 113 million children currently not enrolled in school worldwide, 60% are girls. Girls in developing countries across the world often report a menstrual hygiene and management-related issue as the cause for remaining absent from school. All over India girls often stay away from school on heavy period days, as schools are either far off or not suited to dealing with menstruation and its associated problems.

Typically, when girls are menstruating, they perceive

themselves negatively.

Exacerbating these perceptions is a host of physical inconveniences intensified by social pressures restricting girls' mobility following puberty. In many rural areas, girls in upper primary and secondary schools walk to school and spend anywhere between 6-10 hours a day outside the home. At school menstruating girls are faced with poor facilities – inadequate water for washing, lack of soap, no privacy, non-functioning or inadequate toilets and no disposal facilities. Those who choose to attend while menstruating are often embarrassed by their own body odor caused by using the same cloth without changing and washing, for which they are often teased by the boys. The accompanying abdominal cramps, headaches and fatigue coupled with poor facilities and lack of counseling leads to monthly absenteeism and poor performance, negatively impacting a girl's desire to complete school.

Hygiene promotion efforts have recently included MHM in their messages, focusing mainly on telling

girls and women about correct practices. Wider aspects of the issue – such as privacy; appropriate facilities and arrangements are also being taken up in some areas. Schools should address the counseling needs of young girls on the physiological and psychological aspects of MHM. MHM needs to be understood in its entirety – from the psychological and physical needs of menstruating women right through to the facilities that would enable proper management and human dignity.

Now, various government programmes are ensuring separate toilet facilities for girls to provide them with privacy to manage themselves during their menstruation. Efforts are being made to ensure that sanitary napkins are available at schools with one of the lady teachers to ensure that a girl has access to menstrual hygiene products while at school for change or unexpected start of periods. Incinerators/covered bins are also provided to ensure disposal at school level. Some relevant points to ensure that menstrual

management is supported by schools are:

- Presence of water in/near all toilets for personal hygiene.
- Reliability of supply of water.
- Equity in water collection.
- Incinerators/bins available in girls' toilets for hygienic disposal of sanitary towels.
- Material to wrap soiled napkins available, e.g. old newspaper.
- Safe final disposal of contents (burning or deep burial).
- Sanitary pads available in school in case of emergencies.
- Design and location of toilets does not encourage abuse (initiation, bullying, smoking, drug use, vandalism).
- The school has rules on the proper use of toilets and monitors their utilization.

Counseling can be provided in schools by teachers to students who absent themselves regularly on these days. A confidential talk on how to manage the menstrual flow during school days and how to use school facilities would increase school attendance and also enable them to continue their education.



How does a girl manage if she gets her periods while in school?

Being prepared is the first step in managing your periods. If you know your menstrual cycles, you would know the probable dates. Do carry a sanitary napkin or an alternative. Feel free to ask your teacher for a break to go to the girls' toilet and keep the pad in place. If you avoid the embarrassment of getting your uniform stained, then you will feel confident about staying in school.



Do girls have to take leave or absent themselves to manage their periods?

There is no need to take leave from school during these periods. After all these are monthly features. Every month taking leave during this time may result in missing school and your academic performance may suffer. If you are able to gauge the amount of menstrual flow and plan for periodic change using the school toilet, then there is no reason for embarrassment. Once handling the flow is taken care of, attending school should not be a problem at all.

General hygiene measures

The normal general hygiene routine is helpful in ensuring good health for the girl. These coupled with specific menstrual hygiene measures is necessary to be clean and feel it too.

- Bathe at least once daily. Taking a warm water bath would ensure that there is some relief to the aches and pains associated with menstruation.
- Ensure that undergarments and sweat drenched clothes are changed regularly.
- Cotton panties are preferable to synthetic ones as synthetic ones do not absorb moisture and heat, making it a breeding ground for bacteria.
- A brisk walk and mild exercise are also helpful.



What are some hygiene practices related to menstruation?

- Change napkins regularly.
- Remember to take change of napkins whenever going out.
- Wash the genital area after each use of the toilet, also after urination.
- Keep the area between the legs dry otherwise soreness and chaffing may develop.
- 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. Unhygienic management can result in reproductive tract infections and urinary tract infections.



Do girls need to use soap and deodorant to clean up?

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 "feminine" soaps and washes are not necessary to clean. All one needs to use to wash and clean is plain water and mild soap. Special feminine hygiene products, deodorants and chemical additives pose unnecessary risks when used inside the vagina and are not required to remove bad odour nor do they have any additional benefits.



What are the tips to manage menstruation in a more balanced way?

Nutritional requirements

During menstruation, girls suffer from loss of appetite. However, taking no food or less than normal diet weakens the body. It is also necessary to 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.

- A balanced diet with lots of fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Cut down on salt 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. Calcium has been shown to help alleviate some of the symptoms associated with PMS.
- Get a moderate amount of exercise.
- 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.

To sum up, management of menstruation is all about feeling natural with the body functions. If proper hygiene practices are followed and regular changing of pads are done, then one can feel confident about dealing with the whole process. These hygiene procedures are not very difficult to follow; only they need strict compliance. What is of prime importance is to find a hygienic and clean way of managing the menstrual flow without feeling embarrassed. Any product which you feel comfortable can be used, but there is

need to ensure proper hygiene and sanitary practices in using them.

The period of adolescence is a period when one can really enjoy learning new things and preparing for the adult responsibilities. This process of discussing menstruation is to create an awareness on the menstrual process and to sensitize one to specific needs related to its hygienic management and finally to provide girls confidence and to continue schooling and other regular activities without losing their self-esteem. Education and

awareness about menstruation and body functions, proper use of hygienic products to manage the menstrual flow and proper disposal of used products ensures

a sustainable and easy solution to a seemingly complex problem. Let us enjoy this period without any embarrassment or fear. Happy growing up!!

Disposal of napkins

It is essential to know of disposal mechanisms with usage in order to ensure sustainable management. Whether it is a cloth napkin or a sterile napkin, efforts must be taken that they are properly disposed. At home, one can dig a hole at the backyard and dump the sanitary pad/cloth/napkin for drying and then burn it. Leaving it within the sand will delay decomposition and animals may drag it outside. The common disposal of single napkins is to wash the napkin and then wrap it in a newspaper/waste paper. Drop it into bins provided in the toilets. It is advisable for all toilets used by women to have such bins and

some wrapping paper to ensure proper disposal mechanisms.

Flushing it in toilets should not be done as they clog the drains. In schools especially, disposal of sanitary cloth and sanitary napkins in girls' toilets is a big problem. It affects the proper functioning of the toilets when disposed in the toilet and serious health problems if thrown out in garbage dumps or in the open. There is, thus an imminent need to address this important sanitary waste disposal effectively especially in terms of developing cost effective and simple technology for composite waste disposal for schools.



How does a girl dispose napkins at her house?

Napkins should not be thrown into the toilets particularly the water closet. It is better to keep a dust bin in the corner of the toilet. Wash the soiled napkins and squeeze dry. Keep old newspapers/waste paper ready to wrap the washed napkin. Drop it in the bin. You can dispose the contents of the bin after your cycle bleed is over or daily. This can be given away as waste to garbage collectors in areas where they come to collect them. In case there is no disposal mechanism prevalent in your locality, see about disposing it within your backyard itself either by sanitary pit or incineration.

Disposal in schools/public places

In school and other public toilets this is one serious problem to contend. Often we see indiscriminate throwing of napkins in the drains/toilet, thus leaving them clogged. Even in public toilets, it is better to wrap napkins in paper and drop them in dustbins for disposal.

Innovative low cost technology of incinerators has been developed for proper disposal of sanitary wastes in public/school toilets. This design is simple, safe and cost effective. It has already been installed in many rural schools and women sanitary complexes.

The incinerator burns/incinerates wastes like soiled cloth, cotton waste, sanitary napkins, paper towels etc. The waste gets converted into ash and other non-hazardous residues. The incinerator is user friendly and manually operated. The cost of this technology is not very high. The incinerator comprises of two chambers, an emission control system along with a door for

firing and removal of ash. In each incinerator, there is a spout/opening in the toilet wall for disposal of soiled napkins into the chamber.

The soiled napkin drops on the wire gauze in the chamber on the other side of the toilet wall. This dropped napkin and other waste are fired on weekly basis through the door/firing inlet in the lower chamber. The entire incinerator is attached to the outer wall of the toilet.

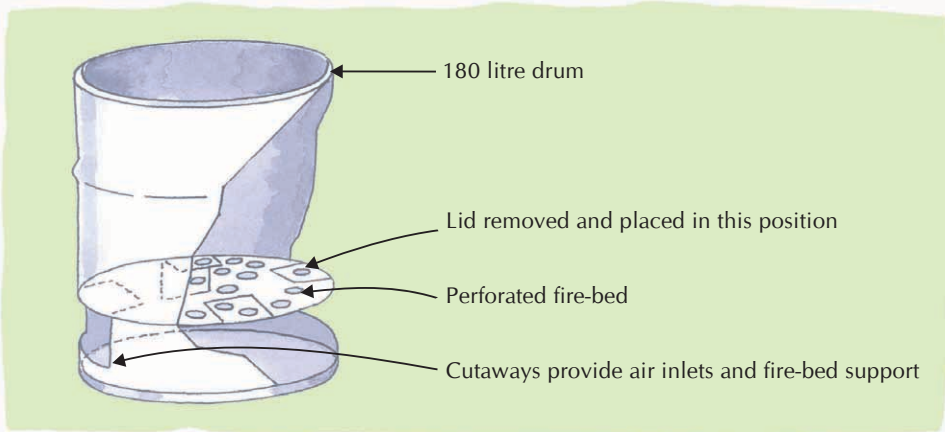
Vent is provided for the disposal of gaseous substances while firing the sanitary wastes. This simple addition to the toilets is highly appreciated by girls and teachers. The use of incinerator has removed the inhibitions among girls on attending schools during menstruation. There are also no blockages of toilets due to sanitary waste disposal into the toilets. With such low investment required for incinerators, schools can install such technology in toilets for better disposal of sanitary waste to check health hazards and subsequently ensure clean toilets and healthy learning environment for children especially girls.

Why is it necessary to dispose of napkins properly?

Napkins have biodegradable and non-biodegradable products. The sewerage system is not capable of handling this garbage and will lead to clogging of the drains leading to overflow of fecal matter which is not desirable. If they are left in the open, they are a sore sight and so the need to dispose them properly.

What is the disposal mechanism that can be adopted at home?

In the house also, an old drum can be converted into a similar incinerator with a smoke vent and periodically it can be incinerated.



Apart from incineration, how can napkins be disposed?

The other method of sanitary napkin disposal is creating a sanitary pit. If you have a large backyard, then this is possible. Dig a pit in the backyard,

keep dropping the newspaper wrapped used napkins in the pit. Cover the pit to stop animals from pulling it outside. Keep dropping ash after use. Once the pit is filled up, close the pit completely and use another pit.



What about disposal of reusable napkins?

Even reusable napkins cannot be used indefinitely. These napkins/cloth pads also need to be thrown away. While reusing always ensure that the pad is clean and sun dried before use. These cloth pads also can be incinerated or disposed in a sanitary pit. It is important to remember whatever the napkin we use; we should not pollute our environment. It is also to be remembered that the garbage such napkins generate, also leads to all problems associated with solid waste management.

Few facts about HIV/AIDS

Since more than half of those infected with HIV virus are young people, following is some information on the issue. The HIV virus spreads through body fluids like blood, semen and vaginal fluid of an infected person.



Why do I need to know about HIV and AIDS?

At present over 5 million people in India are infected with the HIV virus. However unlike other diseases HIV infection is preventable. While it can be disturbing to think about AIDS and consider your own risk, getting up to date information is the first step towards protecting yourself.



What is HIV and AIDS?

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. It weakens the body's defense or immune system. AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome and is the last stage of infection with HIV. AIDS is a syndrome which means that it is not one particular isolated disease but shows a variety of symptoms related to different disorders and diseases. The development of AIDS can take more than 8 to 10 years after infection with HIV.



How does a person become infected with HIV?

There are four main ways or routes of transmission of the virus:

- Unprotected sexual intercourse with an infected person.

- Use of non-sterile, HIV infected or contaminated syringes or needles.
- Transfusion of infected blood.
- Through infected pregnant woman to her unborn child, before, during or after birth.



Does HIV positive means a person has AIDS?

Not necessarily. Given access to appropriate treatment it is possible for an HIV infected person to lead a reasonably normal and healthy life. There are treatments that can slow down the rate at which HIV weakens the immune system. There are other treatments that can prevent or cure some of the infections associated with HIV.



How does it affect me?

Young people are at the centre of the HIV-AIDS epidemic. Half of all new infections are occurring among young people between 15-24 years. Girls are more vulnerable than boys to HIV infection because, girls have fewer opportunities to education, career and freedom to speak and move. However, given accurate information and a supportive environment, evidence shows that it is young people, compared to any other age group, who will most readily adopt safe and responsible behaviors.

Learning to protect yourself, sharing information, dispelling myths, tackling stigma in school and in the community is where young people can contribute most. For more information on HIV and AIDS one must contact the nearby Integrated Counseling and Testing Centre (ICTC).



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