

Technical Brief: Menstrual Hygiene Management

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1 Introduction

Menstruation, commonly called a period, is the natural process of shedding the lining of a woman or adolescent girl's uterus. During menstruation, blood flows from the uterus and passes out of the body through the vagina. This process happens for 2–7 days every month as part of a normal menstrual cycle. Girls begin to menstruate usually between the ages of 9 and 14. Menstruation usually stops when a woman is in her late 40s or early 50s, which is called menopause. A woman will menstruate for approximately 3,000 days during her lifetime.

Having regular menstrual cycles is a sign that important parts of the female body are working normally. The menstrual cycle provides important body chemicals, called hormones, to keep women and girls healthy. It also prepares the body for pregnancy each month.

Menstruation is normal and natural, but managing the menstrual process can be a challenge for many women and girls – especially in developing countries. These challenges include the following:

- Lack of sanitary products
- Lack of water and soap for cleaning
- Lack of access to appropriate sanitation facilities
- Cultural and religious restrictions
- Shame and embarrassment
- Lack of information and awareness

Let's look at some of these challenges and their impacts in more detail in the following sections.





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2 Availability of Sanitary Products


Women and girls need to use clean material to absorb or collect their menstrual blood. Sanitary pads or tampons are most commonly used, and these are normally changed around four times a day during menstruation. Some sanitary pads are meant for single use and are disposed afterwards, while others can be washed and reused.

Accessing sanitary products and underwear can be a challenge for women and girls in developing countries. The cost of disposable sanitary products can be too high for some women and girls. Others may feel ashamed or embarrassed to ask a male family member for money to buy these products. In some communities, these supplies simply are not available. As a result, many women use things like rags, toilet paper, newspaper, leaves or other things that may not be healthy or effective.

Table 1: Sanitary Product Options

Sanitary Product Option	Advantages	Limitations
Natural materials (e.g., mud, cow dung, leaves)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No initial or ongoing cost Locally available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficult and uncomfortable to use Unhygienic May require underwear to keep in place May not be culturally appropriate, if inserted into the vagina
Cloth strips (e.g., old clothes, towels or rags)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No initial cost Low ongoing cost Available in the home Easy to use Reusable Require less frequent disposal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poorly cleaned cloths are unhygienic Require multiple cloths each month for good hygiene Requires private space, water, soap and drying space to clean properly Requires underwear to keep in place
Disposable pads 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sometimes locally available Easy to use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ongoing cost Not available in some places Difficult to dispose Requires underwear to keep in place Require frequent disposal
Reusable pads	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No ongoing cost Sometimes locally available Can be locally produced Reusable Require less frequent disposal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initial cost Not available in some places Requires private space, water, soap and drying space to clean properly May require underwear to keep in place Poorly cleaned pads are unhygienic
Tampons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hygienic if used properly Comfortable to use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ongoing cost Not available in many places Require frequent disposal May not be culturally appropriate, as needs to be inserted into the vagina Requires water and soap for handwashing for hygienic handling Requires initial instruction for proper use

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Sanitary Product Option	Advantages	Limitations
Menstrual cups  (Credit: Juliana Corrales from the Noun Project)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No ongoing cost Reusable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High initial cost Not available in many places Requires private space, water and soap for washing hands and menstrual cup Requires initial instruction for proper use May not be culturally appropriate, particularly for adolescent girls, as needs to be inserted into the vagina

Case Study: Unhygienic Sanitary Products in Bangladesh

The vast majority of women and girls in urban slums and rural Bangladesh use rags during menstruation. These are usually torn from old saris and known as 'nekra'. Rags are washed quickly (with a small clay pot or plastic tub of water called 'bodna') inside the latrine and used several times. There is no private place to change and clean the rags and often no safe water and soap to wash them properly. Even in their homes, a culture of shame forces women to find well-hidden places to dry the rags. These places are often damp, dark and unhealthy. This practice is responsible for a significant proportion of illness and infection.

(Adapted from Ahmed and Yesmin, no date)

An increasing number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), women's groups, schools and small-scale enterprises are manufacturing and distributing reusable and disposable sanitary pads that are affordable and practical. These organizations usually employ vulnerable and marginalized women and girls who make sanitary pads as a way to earn an income. The sanitary products are made using local materials and are marketed using appropriate media and messages. Successful operations have been set up in countries including, but not limited to, India, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda (House et al., 2012).

3 Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

To manage menstruation hygienically and with dignity, it is essential that women and girls have access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) at home and in public places like schools and work places. They need somewhere safe and private to change their sanitary products; clean water and soap for washing their hands, bodies, and reusable cloths; and facilities for safely disposing of used sanitary products or a clean place to dry them if reusable. See CAWST's Technical Brief on Solid Waste Management for more information on safe disposal.

The needs of menstruating women and girls have been largely neglected by the WASH sector, as well as other sectors focusing on sexual and reproductive health and education. As a result, the practical challenges of menstrual hygiene are made even more difficult, and millions of women and girls continue to be denied their rights to WASH, health, dignity and gender equity (House et al., 2012).

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Features of Menstrual Hygiene-Friendly WASH Facilities in the Household

- There is somewhere safe and private for excreta disposal, changing sanitary products and bathing.
- Facilities (e.g., latrine, water supply, bathing units) are near to the house and accessible for all members of the household, including those with mobility limitations.
- Latrines and bathing units have covered walls and a door with an internal lock.
- Water is available inside the latrine (e.g., from a tap or container).
- The latrine and bathing units are easy to clean.
- A washable container with lid for collecting sanitary products is located inside the latrine and/or bathing units.
- There is somewhere private for washing sanitary cloths and drying them in the sunlight or using another heat source (e.g., iron).
- There is a mechanism for final disposal of sanitary products, such as a pit or incinerator. See CAWST's Technical Brief on Solid Waste Management for more information.

(House et al., 2012)

4 Cultural and Religious Restrictions

Many cultures and religions have customs and traditions about managing menstruation and interacting with menstruating women. Almost always, there are social norms or unwritten rules and practices about managing periods. Some of these are helpful, but others have potentially harmful implications. Many customs and traditions restrict women and girls' level of participation in society during menstruation. This includes not being able to touch animals, water points, or food that others will eat; and exclusion from religious rituals, the family home and sanitation facilities. For example, 70% of girls in Afghanistan said they weren't able to eat certain foods, and 67% of girls reported they were not able to attend a religious function. This can make their daily lives difficult and limit their freedom (House et al., 2012).

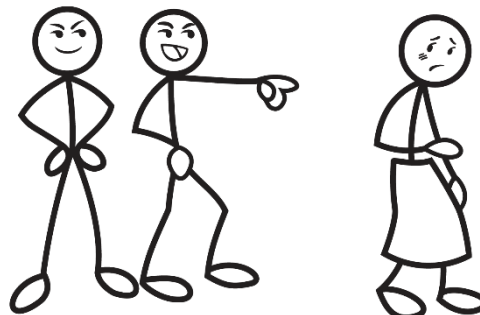
Cultural and religious restrictions related to menstruation are often compounded by traditional associations with evil spirits. In some cultures, women and girls fear that their menstruation can make them more vulnerable to witchcraft, curses or even death.

5 Shame and Embarrassment

One of the biggest problems related to menstruation is the shame. Many women and girls feel embarrassed or ashamed about their menstruation. The embarrassment surrounding menstruation is a somewhat universal phenomenon, found in most cultures of the world. There are many code words and phrases used to refer to menstruation, such as "time of the month" (Bharadwaj and Patkar, 2004).

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Some women and girls are teased or shamed when other people find out they are menstruating. As a result, they often go through great efforts to hide the fact that they are menstruating. They avoid shared toilets and hide sanitary products, even from their husbands, families and peers. They do not feel comfortable talking about menstruation and this means they are unlikely to voice their needs or speak up when there is a problem. This makes it very difficult to address the challenges they face and can lead to other more serious problems.



6 Information and Awareness

Girls who are aware about menstruation and know how to manage it cope much better than those who are caught unaware. Preparedness improves girls' self-esteem, gives them confidence about menstrual hygiene management and helps in overcoming any embarrassment. A girl's first experience of menstruation can be a frightening time. If she does not know about menstruation, she can be shocked to see blood coming out of her vagina. She may think she is sick or dying, or believe she has done something wrong and will be punished (UNICEF, 2008).

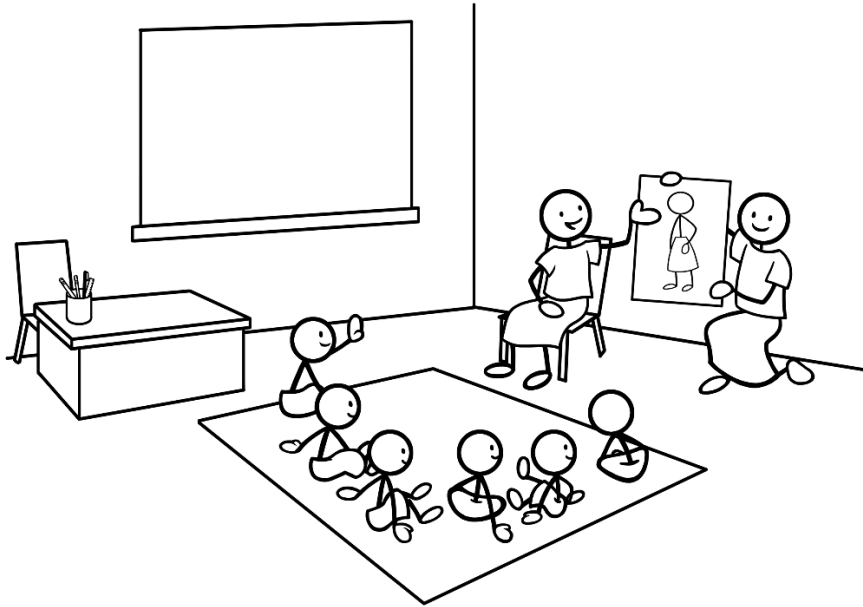
In many cultures, menstruation is difficult to discuss in the home and also unlikely to be taught in school. Girls often grow up with limited knowledge of menstruation because their mothers and other women are embarrassed and shy away from discussing the issues with them. Even after girls begin to menstruate, very little information is often given to them about the physiological processes involved and the hygienic practices to be followed. Adult women may also not be aware of the biological facts or good menstrual hygiene practices. Instead they pass on cultural taboos and restrictions to be observed. Adolescent girls often seek information about menstruation from their peers who also do not know better (UNICEF, 2008).



Men and boys typically know even less, but it is important for them to understand menstrual hygiene so they can respect women and girls. Educating boys (particularly from adolescence) on the challenges and struggles girls face, could help reduce teasing. It could also help them become more understanding and supportive of their wives, daughters, mothers, students, employees and peers (House et al., 2012).

Making factual information available is essential to counter negative menstruation customs and give positive support to women and girls. Schools provide an opportunity to reach a large number of girls (and boys) with information on menstrual hygiene. Girls can be engaged through the education curriculum, additional sessions outside the curriculum and through health and hygiene clubs and other support groups. Education programs are also needed for teachers and school authorities, as well as sensitization for parents and wider communities. Such programs require experts from health, WASH, and the education sectors to all work together (Kirk and Sommer, 2006).

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Teaching girls about menstruation at school

7 Impact on Health

Menstruation is a natural process; however, if not properly managed it can result in health problems. Reports have identified links between poor menstrual hygiene practices and the following health impacts in women and girls:

- Rashes and irritations
- Urinary, vaginal and perineal infections
- Complications with reproduction and pregnancy
- Complications associated with female genital mutilation or cutting

However, research on the actual health risks of different menstrual hygiene practices, particularly in developing countries, is limited (House et al., 2012).

8 Impact on Education

Many women and girls choose stay home and not go to public places when they are menstruating. This could be due to a variety of reasons, including lack of access to sanitary products, menstrual pain and discomfort and lack of access to pain medication, poor WASH facilities, and fear of teasing. Girls in developing countries often report that they miss school because of menstrual hygiene management (UNICEF, 2008). Regular absence from school means that girls have less opportunity to succeed in education, and workingwomen could lose wages or even their jobs if they have to stay home to manage their menstruation.

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From a very practical perspective, girls who lack adequate sanitary products (e.g., pads) may miss school each month during their period. Not having proper sanitary protection can be very embarrassing and stressful for a girl going to school while she is menstruating. Leakage can stain a girl's uniform and can provoke teasing from boys, as well as from other girls. Even if girls have access to sanitary products, they often have to manage with poor WASH facilities at school – inadequate water for washing, lack of soap, no privacy, nonfunctioning or inadequate latrines, and no disposal facilities for sanitary products. While poor facilities create unfriendly school environments for all children, they are particularly difficult for menstruating girls.

Where girls are able or determined to attend school throughout menstruation, the insufficient WASH facilities and sanitary protection may nevertheless create discomfort for girls in the classroom. This can include an inability to participate. For example, menstruating girls may hesitate to go up to the front of the class to write on the board, or to stand up as is often required for answering teachers' questions, due to fear of having an 'accident' and staining their uniforms (Kirk and Sommer, 2006).

This discomfort is increased when male teachers and boy students show insensitivity to the challenges women and girls face in managing menstruation. Male teachers, for example, do not always understand a girl's urgent need to go to the bathroom, and may insist that she wait until the end of class. Worse still are the situations where male teachers and boy students tease the girls (Kirk and Sommer, 2006).

Poor WASH facilities in schools also affect female staff experiences. It is very likely that female staff are frequently absent during menstruation due to the inability of the school infrastructure to meet their health and hygiene needs (Kirk and Sommer, 2006).

WASH projects in schools tend to focus only on physical infrastructure, such as latrines and water supplies. However, addressing menstruation challenges requires more than simply building a latrine or drilling a well. Not only do the design of latrines need to be menstrual-hygiene friendly, but WASH projects also need to link the physical infrastructure with the overall teaching and school environment (see the following box) to address menstrual hygiene management in a more comprehensive and holistic way (Kirk and Sommer, 2006).

The benefits of good menstrual hygiene in school, although not yet well documented, include the following:

- More time spent in school (female teachers and school girls)
- Increased concentration
- Higher self-esteem
- Increased comfort, good hygiene, less irritation from sanitary materials and less risk of related infections
- Greater participation
- More confidence to stand up to answer questions and to ask to leave the classroom to use the latrine (House et al., 2012)

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Features of Menstrual Hygiene-Friendly Schools

Infrastructure:

- Separate latrines are available for boys and girls, and male and female teachers.
- Latrines have doors with locks, and are secure and private.
- Latrine, water supply and hand washing facilities are in a safe location.
- Hand washing facilities are inside the latrine, with soap and water available at all times.
- Water is available (from a tap or bucket) inside latrines, bathing units and changing rooms.
- Latrines can be easily cleaned and there is an efficient mechanism for sustaining cleanliness and maintenance.
- The facilities are accessible for all girls, boys and staff, including those with mobility limitations.
- Each latrine has a washable container with lid for collecting sanitary protection materials, and wrapping materials.
- A small mirror is present in the latrine to help girls check for spotting or leaking and ensure everything is in order before leaving.
- A mechanism is established for the collection and disposal of sanitary protection materials, such as in a pit or incinerator.
- Changing facilities are provided in a larger latrine cubicle that can be used by all girls, so that sanitary protection materials can be changed discretely.
- A financing mechanism is established to sustain the operation and maintenance of water supply, latrine and hand washing facilities.

Teaching and School Environment:

- Teachers are knowledgeable about menstrual hygiene in school and the needs of girls and female staff.
- Menstrual hygiene is included in the curriculum.
- Affordable sanitary products are available for girls who need them or training is provided on how to make them.
- The school governing bodies are aware of the menstrual hygiene needs of girls and staff, and work to ensure the school is menstrual hygiene-friendly.
- Menstrual hygiene is incorporated into the school's monitoring systems.

(House et al., 2012)

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9 Further Information

CAWST (2013). Technical Brief: Solid Waste Management. CAWST, Calgary, Canada. Available at: www.cawst.org/resources

- This technical brief discusses how to safely and properly manage solid waste in developing countries, including waste generation, collection, treatment, and final disposal.

House, S., Mahon, T. and S. Cavill (2012). Menstrual Hygiene Matters: A Resource for Improving Menstrual Hygiene Around the World. WaterAid, London, UK. Available at: www.wateraid.org/what-we-do/our-approach/research-and-publications/view-publication?id=02309d73-8e41-4d04-b2ef-6641f6616a4f&sc_lang=en

- This resource is divided into modules, each with its own toolkit, focusing on various aspects of menstrual hygiene. It presents comprehensive and practical guidance on what is already being implemented in different contexts to encourage replication for improving practices for women and girls in low- and middle-income countries. It will be of particular use to WASH sector professionals, as well as those from other sectors, including health, sexual and reproductive health and rights, education, community development, protection, and gender.

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