Menstruation: Empowerment and Sustainability



A menstrual literacy training manual for youth leaders

Credits

This training manual was created by a consortium of eight partners. These partners are:

















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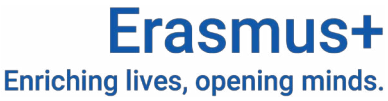
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Menstruation: Empowerment and Sustainability

Menstruation, empowerment and sustainability go hand in hand in creating a society where women, girls, and those who menstruate, feel confident, informed, and supported in managing their periods.

Empowerment means dismantling the stigma and obstacles surrounding menstruation, ensuring equitable access to knowledge, products, and resources. Menstruation is a social justice issue because access to menstrual products, education, and healthcare is not equally available to all. Providing everyone with the tools, information, and respect needed to manage their periods safely is a critical issue of gender equality, public health, and human rights.

Sustainability focuses on choosing period products that are environmentally friendly and reduce waste, such as reusable menstrual cups, pads, and organic options. Sustainability in menstruation involves making choices that minimise environmental impact while supporting long-term health and well-being.

Together, menstruation, empowerment and sustainability promote not only better health and dignity for individuals but also a cleaner, more equitable society for all.

What is the manual for?

This manual is designed for use by **youth leaders** in any sector to increase menstrual literacy with a focus on empowerment and sustainability, leading to improved menstrual health in young people through activities and discussions in their youth setting.

The manual includes information on menstruation, menstrual health, myths and taboos, menstruation and its relationship to the environment and health, and period product choices, as well as tools and resources to convey this information to young people.

Menstrual education is essential for the achievement of menstrual health, recognized as an integral part for the realisation of human rights of all genders, the achievement of gender equality and the Sustainable Development Goals. Menstrual education is crucial to tackle taboos, stigma and discrimination related to the menstrual cycle to pave the way towards gender equality.

How was this manual created?

This manual was cocreated through a partnership of eight European environmental charities and a youth advisory council made up of young people across eight European countries (Ireland, UK, Portugal, Spain, Netherlands, Croatia, Hungary and Ukraine).

Input was also given by others working in the field of menstrual education through either participation in the advisory council meetings or through interviews. This included input and advice from university researchers studying menstruation, sports scientists, nutritionists and youth leaders, as well as from organisations offering menstrual education programmes globally.

A full list of contributors can be found in the acknowledgements at the beginning of this manual!

How to use this manual?

The guide is designed to be used in whatever setting, youth age group and time frame you have available! We feel that like any conversation this topic is best covered over a few weeks and integrated into the rest of your youth settings, however we understand this may not be possible in all cases!

Each of the six topics include information for you as a youth leader on the subject and a series of different activities and learning resources of varying lengths that you can use to cover the topic with your group. There is a short list of activity ideas at the end of each topic and then further resources stored in the Resource Drive videos. You can choose from quizzes, creative activities, worksheets, videos and games, as well as provide them with information sheets on the various topics You will know your group best and what works for them.



Topic 1: Embracing periods – creating a period positive culture in your youth space!

Building a period-positive culture means creating an environment where menstruation is talked about openly, without shame or stigma. As a youth leader, you can play a key role in normalizing periods and ensuring that everyone feels supported.

Creating a Safe Space and period-positive culture in your youth setting

As a youth leader, you can help break the stigma around periods by creating a welcoming and supportive environment for open conversations. Here's how:

Normalize the Conversation

- **Lead by Example** – Talk about periods confidently and without embarrassment. If youth leaders are open about the topic, others will feel more comfortable too.
- **Encourage Open Dialogue** – Let teens know it's okay to ask questions, share experiences, and express concerns about their periods.



"By developing our personal relationships with our periods and finding out what works for us, we can learn to understand and appreciate ourselves as women."
Jo, Ireland

Create Judgment-Free Zones

- **Host Private & Safe Discussions** – Set up small group chats, clubs, or support circles where teens can talk freely about menstrual health. Make sure these spaces are safe from teasing or judgment.
- **Offer Anonymous Question Boxes** – Place a box where students can drop in questions about periods without revealing their identity. Answer them in group discussions or through informational posters.

Educate & Empower

- **Provide Reliable Information** – Share fact-based knowledge on periods, menstrual health, and self-care. Use books, infographics, or social media to make learning accessible.
- **Discuss Different Menstrual Products** – Talk about pads, tampons, menstrual cups, reusable pads, and period underwear to help teens find what works best for them.
- **Host Educational Workshops** – Organise Q&A sessions with healthcare professionals, educators, or older students who can provide guidance and support.

Ensure Access to Period Products

- **Stock Bathrooms with Free Supplies** – Work with your youth setting to provide free pads, tampons, and reusable products in bathrooms.
- **Create Period Care Kits** – Assemble kits with different period products and a small guide on

managing periods. Offer them discreetly to those in need.

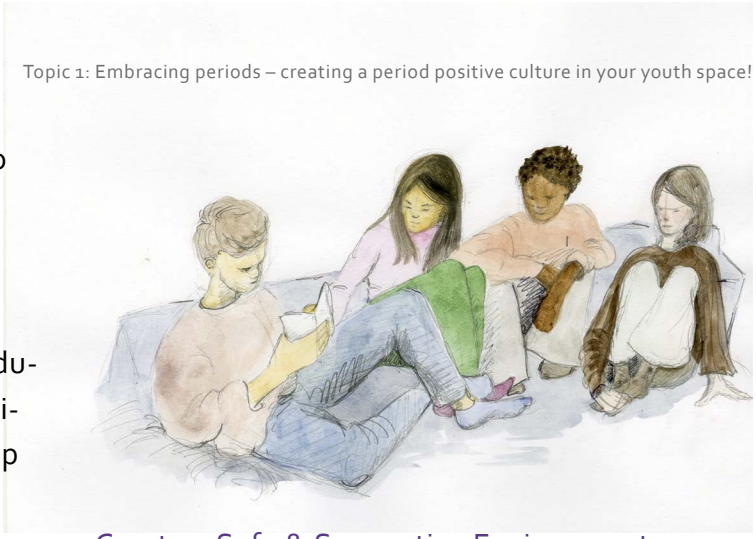
Challenge Period Stigma

- **Encourage All Genders to Participate** – Educate boys and non-menstruators about periods so they can support their peers and help end misinformation.
- **Use Posters & Social Media** – Display positive messaging about menstrual health in schools, youth centers, and online to normalise the conversation.
- **Address Cultural & Personal Beliefs** – Respect different views on menstruation while promoting a safe and inclusive environment for all.

By fostering open, shame-free conversations and ensuring access to resources, youth leaders can make a huge difference in how teens experience and talk about periods. Every effort helps support a culture where no one feels embarrassed or unprepared for their period.

How to Start a Conversation About Periods with Teens as a Youth Leader

Talking about periods can feel awkward at first, but as a youth leader, you have the power to make it a normal and comfortable topic. You know your own group and what may work with one group may not with another but here's a few ideas on how to start the conversation in a way that is open, inclusive, and stigma-free. We recommend that all genders are included in the conversation, this helps to fight stigma and shame associated with menstruation!



Create a Safe & Supportive Environment

- **Set the Tone** – Make it clear that periods are a natural part of life, not something to be embarrassed about. Keep the conversation casual and open.
- **Respect Privacy** – Some teens may be shy, so provide opportunities for one-on-one chats or anonymous Q&A options.
- **Use Inclusive Language** – Not everyone who has a period identifies as female. Acknowledge all menstruators to ensure inclusivity.

Use a Natural Conversation Starter

- **Relate It to Everyday Life** – Bring up periods in connection with sports, self-care, mental health, or even school stress.
- **Use Media & Pop Culture** – A movie, social media post, or news story about menstruation can be a great way to introduce the topic.
- **Share a Fact or Statistic** – For example, "Did you know the average person has about 450 periods in their lifetime?" to spark curiosity.

Ask Open-Ended Questions

- "What do you already know about periods?"
- "Have you ever heard any myths about periods?"

- "What would make it easier to talk about periods?"

Let them share their thoughts without pressure and validate their experiences.

Provide Practical Information

- **Talk About Different Period Products** – Pads, tampons, menstrual cups, and period underwear – explain the options without judgment. See Topic 6 for information on period products.
- **Explain Cycle and Biology Basics** – Not everyone's period is the same; discuss how cycles, flow, and symptoms can vary. See Topics 2 and 3 for information on biology basics, the menstrual cycle and healthy menstruation.
- **Address Common Concerns** – Pain management, hygiene, irregular cycles, and how to handle periods at school. See Topic 3 for information on healthy menstruation.

Keep It Engaging & Fun

- **Use Games & Activities** – Try a period myth-busting quiz or a "guess the product" challenge.
- **Share Real Stories** – If comfortable, share your own experience or a relatable story to make the topic feel more personal.
- **Encourage Peer Support** – Suggest starting a "period buddy" system where teens can look out for each other.

Encourage Further Discussion

- **Make It an Ongoing Conversation** – Normalize talking about periods regularly, not just as a one-time topic.
- **Offer Resources** – Recommend period-tracking apps, books, or websites for those who want to learn more.
- **Reassure Them** – Let teens know they can always come to you or another trusted adult with questions or concerns.

The key to talking about periods is to make it normal, positive, and judgment-free. When you create an open space for discussion, you empower teens to embrace their menstrual health with confidence!

Gender and menstruation

We firmly believe that menstrual education must be fully inclusive! This means including all genders in the conversation as well as using inclusive language when discussing periods.

"During my period I always felt so embarrassed quietly telling female teachers, while I just went back to my seat for male teachers.... Young girls everywhere shouldn't have to be embarrassed of a normal bodily function."
Maisie, Ireland

Why Boys and other menstrual allies should learn about menstruation

Including boys and other menstrual allies in period education helps break taboos, reduce stigma, and create a more supportive and informed society. By making menstruation a shared topic rather than a taboo subject, we take a step closer to true gender equality. Here's why boys should be part of the conversation:

It Fights Stigma and Shame

Periods have been surrounded by myths and misinformation for centuries. When boys are excluded from learning about menstruation, the stigma continues. By educating everyone, we normalize periods and help create a society where no one feels embarrassed about their body. For example, instead of teasing someone for having a period stain, a boy who understands menstruation is more likely to offer support.

It Encourages Empathy and Support

Boys have mothers, sisters, friends, and future partners who menstruate. Understanding periods allows them to be more compassionate and supportive. They can:

- Offer to grab a pad or tampon for a friend in need
- Understand when someone isn't feeling their best due to period pain
- Speak up against period shaming or discrimination



It Promotes Gender Equality

When only girls are taught about menstruation, it reinforces the idea that periods are a "private" or "secret" topic. Teaching boys helps:

- Make periods a normal part of conversation
- Challenge gender-based stereotypes
- Encourage men to advocate for better access to period products and menstrual equity policies

It Prepares Them for Adulthood

In the future, boys will have partners, children, or colleagues who menstruate. Having knowledge about periods helps them:

- Be better partners in relationships
- Support their future daughters if they become parents
- Be understanding coworkers and employers, ensuring workplaces accommodate menstrual health needs

Using inclusive language when discussing menstruation

Using inclusive language when discussing menstruation ensures that all people who experience it, including transgender and non-binary individuals, feel acknowledged and respected. It helps break stigma, fosters a more supportive and understanding community, and promotes equality in menstrual health education and access. Inclusive language makes discussions more welcoming and ensures that no one is excluded from important conversations about their health. Try saying women, girls and people who menstruate, or alternatively women, girls and people with periods.

Tackling Period Poverty as a Youth Leader

Period poverty – the lack of access to menstrual products, education, and proper sanitation – affects millions worldwide. As a youth leader, you can make a real impact by ensuring no one in your community struggles to manage their period with dignity.

Provide Free & Accessible Period Products

- **Set Up a Free Period Station** – Place pads, tampons, and reusable options in bathrooms or common areas.
- **Partner with Local Organizations** – Work with charities, businesses, or schools to get donations.
- **Apply for Grants** – Look for youth-led funding programs that support menstrual equity.

Fundraising

- **Organize a Period Product Drive** – Encourage members to donate period products for local charities or schools.
- **Plan a Fundraiser** – Sell handmade crafts, bake goods, or organize a fun event to raise money for period supplies.

"On some of my periods during months when I had exams, and I could work less, I couldn't afford full amount of pads/tampons that I would need, so on the first and last day of the period I would use 1 pad and some toilet paper in order to save the pads I am using."
Ladybug M, Croatia

- **Work with Local Businesses** – Ask supermarkets or pharmacies to donate products or sponsor your initiative.

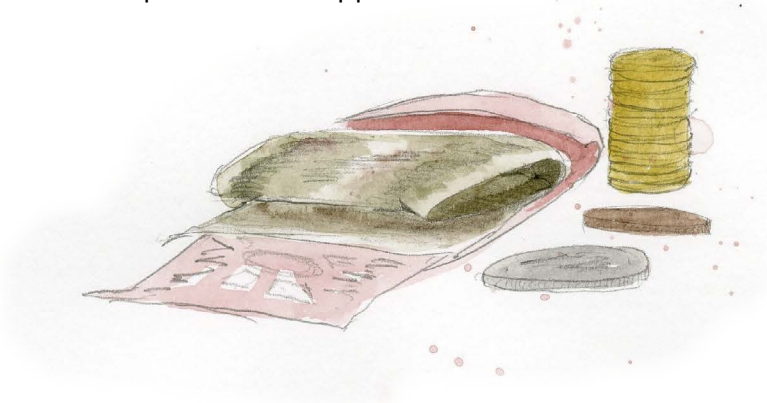
Advocate for Policy Change

- **Petition for Free Products in public spaces such as schools** – Gather signatures to push for accessible period supplies in school bathrooms.
- **Speak to Local Leaders** – Address the importance of menstrual equity with policymakers and educators.
- **Promote Sustainable Solutions** – Advocate for free or subsidised reusable period products for low-income individuals.

Create a Safe & Supportive Space

- **Ensure Judgment-Free Access** – No one should have to ask for products – make them easily available.
- **Encourage Open Conversations** – Let group members know they can talk about period concerns such as access to menstrual products and period poverty without embarrassment. See above for ideas on starting the conversation!
- **Support Mental & Physical Health** – Address the emotional impact of period poverty and offer resources.

Set up a "Period Support Box" where members can submit anonymous questions or concerns to be addressed in group discussions.



Tackling period poverty starts with awareness, action, and advocacy. As a youth leader, you have the power to break the stigma, provide resources, and ensure no one in your community has to struggle with their period.

Activity ideas for starting a conversation on menstruation and creating a period positive culture



Activity idea – Host a "Pack the Period Kits" event where young people assemble kits with menstrual items and positive notes for those in need.

Advocacy idea – Write letters to local representatives requesting government support for free period products in public spaces.

Game idea – The Menstrual budget challenge! How to play:

- Give teams a fake budget to buy period products for a month.
- Include prices for different menstrual products, different brands, both disposable and reusable products.

- Ask: Which is more affordable long-term?
- Discuss period poverty and ways to support people in need

Game idea – If you have access to Dixit cards these are a great way to get people thinking and discussing almost anything! How to play:

- Ask everyone to pick a Dixit card that makes them think about menstruation (theirs if they menstruate or menstruation in general if they don't)
- Then people take it in turns to explain why they selected their card. As a youth leader it is helpful to start with your own card and why you chose it to break down any initial hesitation young people may feel around the game.

For more games, creative activities, worksheets and other ideas see the Resources drive!

"When I was 11 years old, I noticed some brown stains on my panties. I didn't know what was happening. I was terrified for days, and too embarassed to tell anyone. Finally on a Monday, which was "conveniently" first day of a new school, a red liquid started coming out, and then I knew it was period.... Why nobody ever told me it will be brown at first?! I gathered the strength to tell my best friend that I just got the period, and she goes all happy and excited: "Me too!" – "When?" – "Today!" And we laughed and everything was all right after that."

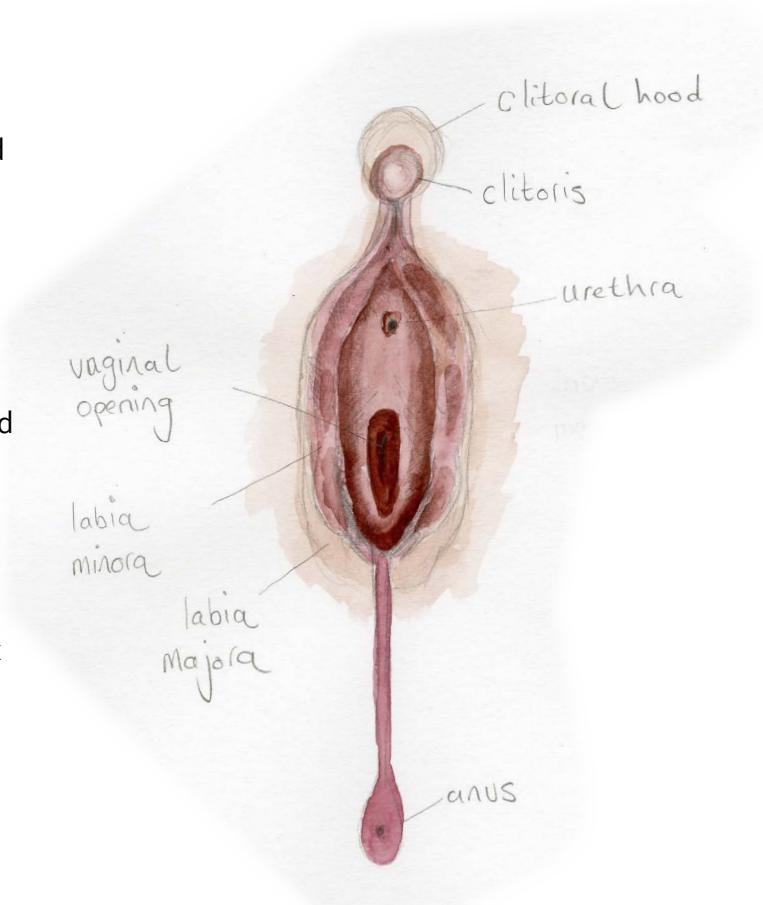
Kiki, Croatia

Topic 2: Biology basics and the menstrual cycle

The reproductive system

Understanding their reproductive system and external genitalia empowers young women and those who menstruate to take charge of their health, recognise what's normal for their bodies, and identify any potential concerns early. Knowledge about of their body and menstruation helps with making informed choices, promotes body confidence, reduces stigma, and supports open conversations about healthcare.

The female reproductive system enables menstruation, sexual activity, and the ability to conceive. It also supports the production of sex hormones, which help the body mature into adulthood. The female reproductive system includes both the external genital organs (outside the body) and the internal genital organs (inside the body).



External view of the female reproductive system

The external part of the female reproductive organs is called the vulva, which means "cover." The vulva, which is located between the legs, covers the opening that leads to the vagina and other reproductive organs located inside the body.

The external genital organs are:

- **Labia:** two sets of skin folds that cover the opening of the vagina
- **Clitoris:** organ where the lips join and that produces pleasure during sexual relations
- Opening to the **vagina**

"I've always been pretty regular with my periods, but I think it took me several years to start becoming more aware of my changes throughout my cycle and how my diet, stress, and anxiety throughout my cycle would affect what my period would be like. That's why I had a lot of very painful periods, which I believe was related to eating habits and difficulty understanding and managing emotions."
Ana, Portugal

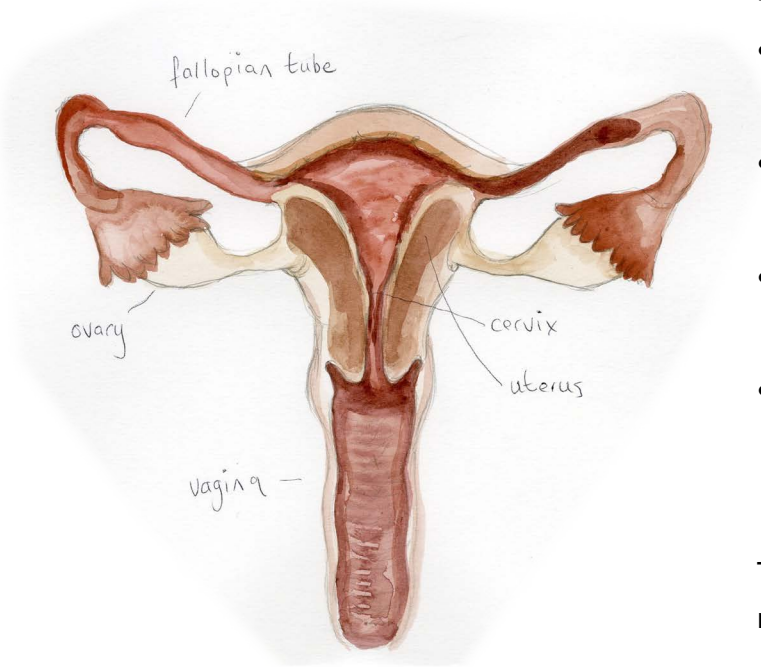
Internal view of the female reproductive system

The internal reproductive organs are:

- **Ovaries:** a pair of organs that produce eggs and female hormones such as oestrogen
- **Fallopian tubes:** the tubes through which eggs pass to go from the ovaries to the uterus
- **Uterus:** organ where the fetus grows and develops before birth.
- **Vagina:** birth canal, where penis is introduced during hetrosexual sexual relations, excretory duct of menstrual fluid.
- **Cervix:** end of the uterus, that has an opening for menstrual blood to come out and for a baby to born.

The Menstrual Cycle

The purpose of the menstrual cycle is to prepare the body for a possible pregnancy. Each month, the uterus builds up a lining filled with nutrients in case a fertilized egg needs a place to grow. If no pregnancy happens, the body sheds this lining, which leaves the body as period blood. This cycle then repeats to keep the reproductive system healthy and ready for the future. This cycle typically lasts around 28 days, though it can vary.



The cycle can be divided into four phases:

1. **Menstrual Phase (Days 1-5):** You get your period as the uterus sheds its lining.
2. **Preovulatory Phase (Days 6-14):** Your body prepares for ovulation. The egg matures and the uterine lining rebuilds.
3. **Ovulation (Around Day 14):** A mature egg is released from the ovary.
4. **Luteal Phase (Days 15-28):** The empty follicle releases progesterone to thicken the uterus lining in case of pregnancy. If there's no pregnancy, hormone levels drop and the cycle starts again.

Menstrual hormones control the different phases of your cycle. Here's a quick overview:

- **Oestrogen:** Helps build the uterine lining and stimulates egg development.
- **Progesterone:** Prepares the uterus for a potential pregnancy by thickening the lining.
- **Luteinizing Hormone (LH):** Triggers ovulation, releasing the mature egg from the ovary.
- **Follicle-Stimulating Hormone (FSH):** Helps the egg mature in the follicle before ovulation.

These hormones work together to regulate your menstrual cycle each month.

Understanding the Menstrual Cycle as the Four Seasons



The menstrual cycle can be understood as a natural rhythm, much like the changing seasons. Each phase brings different energies, emotions, and physical experiences – just like winter, spring, summer, and autumn. Encourage young people to try noting down their feelings and energy levels over a few months to see how their cycle affects them. By recognising these patterns, we can work with our bodies instead of against them. Here's how the cycle connects to the seasons:

1. Menstrual Phase – days 1 to 5 (Winter)



The **menstrual phase**, when you have your period, is like **winter** – a time for rest, reflection, and renewal. During your period, the body is shedding its uterine lining, and energy levels tend to be lower. This is a time when your body needs extra care and rest.

- **What's happening:** Your body sheds the uterine lining, and you get your period.
- **Hormones:** Oestrogen and progesterone are at their lowest levels.
- **Feelings:** You may feel introspective, tired, or more sensitive. It's normal to want to slow down and take things easy.
- **Energy:** Like the quiet of winter, your energy may be focused inward, and you may feel like you need to recharge.
- **Food to support wellbeing:**
  - Iron-rich foods: During your period, you lose iron, so it's important to replenish it. Iron helps carry oxygen to your muscles, keeping you energized. Without enough iron, you may feel tired, pale, and sluggish. Good sources include red meat (beef, lamb, pork), fish, poultry (chicken, turkey), beans, lentils, peas, dark leafy greens (spinach, kale, broccoli), nuts, and seeds.
  - Vitamin C-rich foods: Your body needs vitamin C to absorb iron effectively. Include foods like peppers, strawberries, oranges, orange juice, blackcurrants, green vegetables, and tomatoes.
  - Hydrating foods: Staying hydrated helps reduce bloating and fatigue. Eat water-rich fruits and vegetables such as cucumber, watermelon, melon, tomatoes, and oranges.
  - Magnesium-rich foods can help reduce bloating. Try adding pumpkin seeds, nuts, spinach, and wholegrains to your diet.
  - Ginger: This can help soothe digestion and ease bloating or cramps. Try ginger tea or add ginger to meals.
- **Exercise to support wellbeing:**
  - You may prefer gentle movement – Walking, stretching, restorative yoga and light strength training during this time.
  - Additionally, you may prefer to avoid intense workouts. Please listen to your body as you may need to prioritise rest.

2. Preovulatory Phase – days 6-14 (Spring)



The **preovulatory phase** is like **spring** – a time of renewal, growth, and energy. After your period ends, your body begins to prepare for ovulation, and energy starts to rise. You may feel more social, productive, and motivated as oestrogen levels increase.

- **What's happening:** Your body prepares for ovulation. The egg matures, and the uterine lining starts to rebuild.
- **Hormones:** Oestrogen rises, and follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH) helps the egg mature.
- **Feelings:** You might feel more outgoing, positive, and creative, just like the blossoming energy of spring.
- **Energy:** This is a time of building momentum and laying the foundation for new possibilities.
- **Food to support wellbeing:**
  A balanced diet is key throughout your cycle to keep your energy levels up and support overall health. Focus on:
  – Plenty of colourful vegetables, salad, or fruit with every meal. Aim for ⅓ – ½ of your plate to come from these nutrient-packed foods.
  – Complex carbohydrates for steady energy. Choose wholegrain cereals, rice, pasta, potatoes, and bread for added fibre, keeping digestion on track. Aim for ⅓ – ¼ of your plate.
  – Protein for growth and repair. Sources include meat, poultry, fish, eggs, dairy (milk, yoghurt, cheese), beans, lentils, nuts, and seeds. Aim for ⅓ – ¼ of your plate.
  – Healthy fats in small amounts for sustained energy. Good sources include nuts, nut butters, seeds, avocado, and plant-based oils.
  – Hydration is key! Drink fluids throughout the day to prevent dehydration, which can cause headaches and low concentration. Water, milk, and sugar-free drinks are great choices. Tip: If you experience insomnia, anxiety, or bloating before your period, consider cutting back on caffeine, which is found in tea, coffee and energy drinks.
- **Exercise to support wellbeing:**
  – You may have more energy and enjoy high-intensity workouts – Running, HIIT, spin classes.
  – Strength training to build muscle.
  – Endurance activities – Long hikes, swimming.

3. Ovulation – day 14 (Summer)



Ovulation is like the **summer** of your cycle – high energy, peak fertility, and the time when you feel the most vibrant. During ovulation, the body releases an egg, and you're at your most fertile.

- **What's happening:** The mature egg is released from the ovary and travels to the uterus.
- **Hormones:** A surge in luteinizing hormone (LH) triggers ovulation. Oestrogen peaks.
- **Feelings:** You may feel confident, attractive, and more focused on socialising or engaging in active pursuits.
- **Energy:** Your energy is at its peak, just like the long, bright days of summer.

- **Food to support wellbeing:** Focus on enjoying healthy balanced meals and being hydrated as described previously.
- **Exercise to support wellbeing:**
  - With greater energy you may feel like engaging in power & speed workouts – Sprinting, dance, boxing.
  - Group fitness & social sports – Volleyball, tennis, cycling.
  - Intense strength training – Take advantage of peak endurance.

4. Luteal Phase – days 15-28 (Autumn)



The **luteal phase** is like **autumn** – a time of transition and preparation. After ovulation, your body is getting ready for a potential pregnancy or, if no fertilisation occurs, the next period. Hormones like **progesterone** rise during this phase, and you may experience changes in mood, appetite, and energy levels.

- **What's happening:** The empty egg follicle turns into the corpus luteum, releasing progesterone to prepare the uterus for a possible pregnancy.
- **Hormones:** Progesterone rises, and oestrogen stays steady. If there's no pregnancy, progesterone drops, leading to your next period.
- **Feelings:** You may feel more reflective, introspective, and sometimes irritable as the body prepares for the next cycle.
- **Energy:** Similar to autumn, you may feel that your body is slowing down and beginning to conserve energy, preparing for the shift back into winter.
- **Food to support wellbeing:** You may feel hungrier during this phase, this is normal! Focus on balanced meals as described above to nourish your body.
  - Hydrating foods: Staying hydrated helps reduce bloating and fatigue. Eat water-rich fruits and vegetables such as cucumber, watermelon, melon, tomatoes, and oranges.
  - Magnesium-rich foods can help reduce bloating. Try adding pumpkin seeds, nuts, spinach, and wholegrains to your diet.
  - Ginger: This can help soothe digestion and ease bloating or cramps. Try ginger tea or add ginger to meals.
- **Exercise to support wellbeing:**
  - You may feel that moderate workouts suit you at this time – Pilates, steady-state cardio, light weightlifting.
  - Relaxing activities – Yoga, stretching, nature walks.
  - Listen to your body – Reduce intensity if feeling fatigued.

By understanding your menstrual cycle as a reflection of the seasons, you can better tune into your body's needs. Just like nature's cycles, your body goes through periods of growth, rest, and renewal. Embrace each phase, as each brings something unique to your personal rhythm.

Activity ideas for discussing the menstrual cycle



Game idea – Period Charades – How to Play:

- Write down period-related words or phrases on slips of paper (e.g., "cramps," "mood swings," "buying pads at a store").
- Players take turns acting them out without speaking while the group guesses.

Game idea – "Know Your Body Bingo" – Learning About the Female Genitalia:

Objective: This game helps teens learn the names and functions of the female genitalia in a fun and interactive way. By matching definitions to body parts, players will understand the anatomy and functions of different parts of the female reproductive system.

Creative idea – Menstrual Cycle Seasons Art Challenge:

Assign each phase of the menstrual cycle a season:

- Menstrual Phase = Winter (Rest, reflection)
- Follicular Phase = Spring (Growth, energy rising)
- Ovulation = Summer (Peak energy, confidence)
- Luteal Phase = Autumn (Slowing down, preparing)

Have teens create artwork, a mood board, or poetry representing these phases.

See Resources Drive for more games, creative ideas and worksheets!

"I would like to tell you how my period tracker changed my daily life. I have always had a heavy mood swing during my periods, especially the last few years. Sometimes, it affects me so badly that I have a depression episode a week before my menstruation. After I started tracking my menstruation cycle I found so many answers to the questions regarding self-awareness. Why do I feel so much different and perceive life and world so differently on some days. Now I follow the meditations and try to be understanding and supportive towards myself, especially during this special period every month. It helps me to be in a better tune and harmony with my menstrual and emotional health. It's highly important to know your cycle!"

Yasia, Ukraine

Topic 3: Should it feel like this? – what's normal and when to seek medical advice

What to Expect During Your Period

Women, girls and those who menstruate can expect a range of experiences during their period, which can vary from cycle to cycle. Here's a general idea of what to anticipate:

Changes in blood flow and color



- Period blood may start off brown or pink at the beginning and end of the cycle.
- During the heaviest days, it is usually bright red.
- The total blood loss can range up to 80ml (about five tablespoons) over the entire period.

Common physical symptoms

- **Cramps:** Mild to severe pain in the lower abdomen, back, or thighs.
- **Bloating & Breast Tenderness:** Water retention may cause discomfort.
- **Fatigue:** The body works hard during menstruation, leading to tiredness.
- **Headaches:** Hormonal changes can trigger migraines in some individuals.
- **Digestive Issues:** Constipation or diarrhea is common.

Emotional & mental changes

- Mood swings, irritability, anxiety, or sadness due to hormonal fluctuations.
- Some people feel more emotional or experience difficulty concentrating.

Health & self-care needs

- Changing menstrual products (pads, tampons, menstrual cups, etc.) regularly.
- Staying hydrated and eating nutritious foods to maintain energy.
- Using hot water bottles or heating pads for cramps.

Lifestyle changes

- Some may prefer resting more, while others find that light exercise helps ease discomfort.
- Managing stress can help reduce period symptoms.

Tracking the menstrual cycle can be done easily using a diary or a period-tracking app. This will help young people to anticipate changes in their body and mood throughout the month and plan accordingly.

Typical pain and experiences during periods



Common period cramps (Primary Dysmenorrhea)

Period cramps are caused by normal uterine contractions, and are not a medical condition. They feel like aching pain in the lower belly or back.

- Relief methods:
  - Over-the-counter painkillers (ibuprofen, paracetamol)
  - Reducing stress
  - Gentle exercise
  - Warm baths
  - Heating pad or hot water bottle
  - Getting enough rest

Smoking and drinking alcohol can make cramps worse.



Pre-Menstrual Syndrome (PMS)

PMS affects many people before their period due to hormonal changes. Common symptoms include:

- Mood swings
- Fatigue
- Anxiety
- Bloating and stomach pain
- Breast tenderness
- Sleep disturbances
- Appetite changes

"I hadn't realised how heavy my periods were. I always knew the 2 tablespoons story was nonsense, but it wasn't until I got a mooncup and measured my flow, that I found out I'd had very very heavy periods (100ml+) my whole life and thought that was normal. Why are we not better informed???"
Lynn, Ireland

Managing PMS involves:

- Regular exercise
- Eating a balanced diet
- Getting enough sleep
- Tracking symptoms in a diary
- Avoiding smoking and alcohol



Many people experience these changes in their body during their period, not just before their period, and this is perfectly normal too! See Topic 2 for more details on diet and exercise to support the menstrual cycle.

If PMS symptoms are severe or affect mental health, talk to a doctor.

Irregular periods

Irregular periods are common when young people first start menstruation due to hormonal shifts. There can be variations in:

- Duration (some last up to five days, others longer/shorter)
- Frequency (shorter than 25 days or longer than 35 days)
- Flow (heavier or lighter from month to month)

While irregular periods when young are common, if periods continue to be irregular or become irregular after previously being regular, they should consult their doctor as it may indicate other underlying medical conditions or be caused by diet, stress or pregnancy.

When to see a doctor

Everyone's experience with periods is unique—no two cycles are exactly the same. However, it's important to recognise what's considered normal and what might need medical attention.

Menstrual health conditions are often underdiagnosed! Why is this? Well, it's down to several different factors including:

1. **Normalisation of Symptoms** – Many people assume that painful periods, heavy bleeding, or irregular cycles are just "part of having a period," leading them to avoid seeking medical help.
2. **Lack of awareness** – Conditions like endometriosis, PMDD, and PCOS are not widely discussed, meaning many individuals don't recognise their symptoms as signs of an underlying issue.
3. **Medical dismissal** – Some healthcare professionals may downplay or dismiss menstrual-related symptoms, attributing them to stress or anxiety rather than investigating for potential conditions.
4. **Limited research & education** – Historically, menstrual health has been under-researched, leading to gaps in medical training and delayed advancements in diagnosis and treatment.
5 **Taboos & stigma** – Cultural, racial and societal stigma around menstruation can discourage open conversations about symptoms, leading to delayed diagnoses. For example, black women suffering from fibroids often report being ignored or thought too sensitive to pain.

6. **Variability in symptoms** – Menstrual health conditions often manifest differently from person to person, making diagnosis more challenging.
7. **Healthcare access barriers** – In some areas, limited access to gynecologists or menstrual health specialists can prevent timely diagnosis and treatment.
8. **Overlap with other conditions** – Symptoms of menstrual disorders can mimic other medical issues, leading to misdiagnosis or prolonged diagnostic processes.

For these reasons it's important for everyone to know their cycle, know of common menstrual conditions and be empowered to speak openly about their experiences.

It is important for young people to seek medical advice if they notice any of the following changes:

- Unusually heavy or light periods over multiple cycles
- Large or frequent blood clots
- Severe pain

See below for a list of common menstrual conditions!

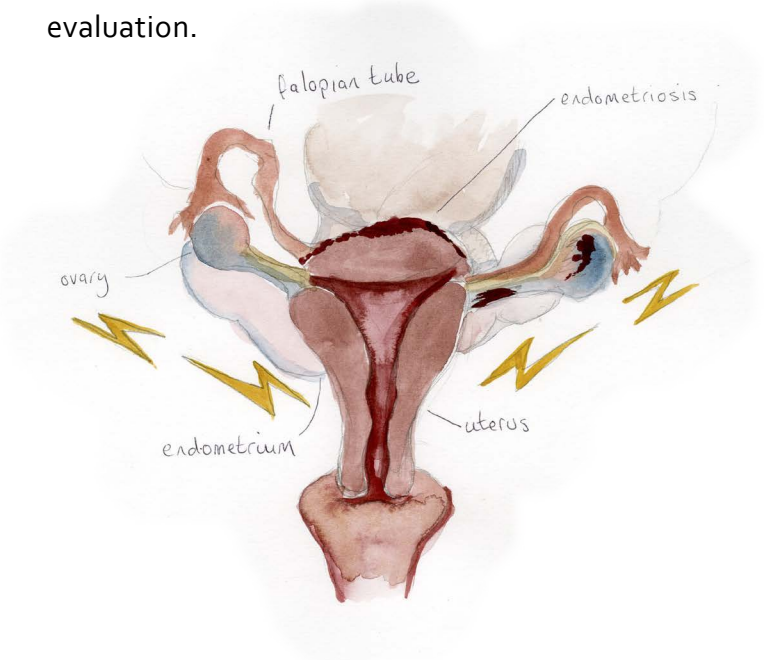
Common Menstrual Health Conditions

Endometriosis

Endometriosis occurs when tissue similar to the uterine lining grows outside the womb, causing pain and irregular bleeding. Symptoms include:

- Pelvic pain, which can be severe
- Heavy, irregular, or prolonged periods
- Pain during urination or bowel movements
- Ovulation pain
- Nausea, vomiting, and disrupted sleep

If a young person suspects endometriosis, they should consult their doctor for further evaluation.



Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS)

PCOS is a hormonal disorder that can lead to irregular or absent periods, excess hair growth, acne, weight gain, and fertility issues. Though there is no cure, managing symptoms with lifestyle changes and medical treatment can help.

Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID)

PID is an infection of the reproductive system that can cause severe abdominal pain, heavy periods, painful urination, and unusual discharge. If left untreated, it can lead to infertility. PID can be treated effectively with antibiotics, so medical care should be sought where there are symptoms.

Fibroids

Fibroids are non-cancerous growths in or around the womb, often linked to oestrogen levels. Black women are up to three times more likely to experience uterine fibroids. Many people don't experience symptoms, but those who do may have:

- Heavy or painful periods
- Lower back pain
- Frequent urination

In rare cases, fibroids can affect pregnancy or fertility. An ultrasound scan can help diagnose them.

Adenomyosis

Adenomyosis occurs when uterine tissue grows into the muscular wall of the womb, leading to heavy, painful periods and pelvic discomfort. Some people may experience no symptoms, while others face significant pain.

Vulvodynia (Vulval Pain)

Vulvodynia is persistent, unexplained pain in the vulva lasting over three months. Symptoms include burning, soreness, and throbbing pain, making tampon or menstrual cup insertion and penetrative sex painful.

Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD)

PMDD is a more severe form of PMS and can cause:

- Extreme mood swings
- Anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts
- Physical discomfort like cramps, headaches, and bloating

If a young person thinks they might have PMDD, they should seek medical support.

Missed or Stopped Periods

Many factors can cause a delayed or absent period:

- Stress
- Intense exercise
- Sudden weight loss or gain
- Pregnancy
- Menopause
- PCOS (Polycystic Ovary Syndrome)
- Breastfeeding
- Certain medical conditions (e.g., thyroid disorders, diabetes)



If periods stop unexpectedly, young people should be advised to check in with a doctor.

How to talk to a doctor about menstruation

Talking to a doctor about their period might feel a little nerve-wracking for young people. However, if they have concerns it is important they do so. Here are some suggestions you can pass on to young people to support them in bringing up the conversation with their doctor:

"I got my period without fully understanding what it was. Over time, I came to terms with my cycle and learned to live with it – until my period cramps became unbearable. On the first day of my period, I couldn't do anything because of the pain, so I had to take many painkillers throughout the day. I had tender breasts, severe acne, and sometimes even a fever. I tried to find out what could be causing these symptoms, but every website told me it was normal – everyone experiences their period differently. It wasn't until my first gynecologist visit that I learned I have PCOS, and that the pain and acne were symptoms of the condition. Looking back, I wish someone had told me about PCOS and its symptoms. It would have saved me from enduring the pain for so long, and I could have taken steps to lessen it."

Réka, Hungary

Be honest about the symptoms

Doctors need accurate info to provide the correct help, so they need to be honest about all of their symptoms. Young people can say something like:

- "My periods are really painful, and painkillers don't help. Is that normal?"
- "I've been having really heavy periods. Should I be worried?"
- "My periods are super irregular. Could something be wrong?"

Tracking their cycle

Keeping a record of their period can help a young person's doctor understand what's going on. Suggest that they try noting:

- When their last period started
- How long it lasted
- How heavy the flow was
- Any symptoms like cramps, headaches, or mood changes

They can use a period-tracking app or a simple notebook for this!

Don't be afraid to ask questions

It is always good to ask questions to get to the bottom of the issue! Some good questions include:

- "What's the best way to manage period pain?"
- "Are my symptoms normal, or should I get tested for anything?"

- "What kind of birth control options help with period symptoms?"

If they feel nervous, they could bring someone along

If talking to the doctor alone feels overwhelming, they can bring a parent, guardian, or friend for support.

Remember – Doctors have heard it all!

Periods are a completely normal part of health, and doctors deal with these questions every day, so there's no need for anyone to feel embarrassed!

Periods & Mental Health: How your cycle affects your mood

Your menstrual cycle doesn't just impact your body – it can also affect your emotions and mental health. Hormonal changes throughout your cycle can cause mood swings, anxiety, irritability, or even depression-like feelings.

How periods affect mental health

- **Before Your Period (PMS & PMDD):** Many people experience PMS (Premenstrual Syndrome), which can cause mood swings, anxiety, and fatigue. A more severe form, PMDD (Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder), can lead to intense emotional distress, depression, and even suicidal thoughts.
- **During Your Period:** Some people feel relief once their period starts, but others continue to experience low mood, fatigue, and brain fog.



- **After Your Period:** As hormone levels rise again, many feel an improvement in energy and mood.

Managing period-related mood swings

- Stay active – exercise can boost your mood.
- Prioritise sleep and relaxation.
- Eat a balanced diet rich in iron and healthy fats.
- Track your cycle to notice patterns.
- If symptoms are severe, consider talking to a doctor.

If your period is consistently affecting your mental health in a big way, don't ignore it – support is available!

Understanding your menstrual health empowers you to recognise changes and seek help when necessary. If your periods are causing

significant discomfort or affecting your daily life, don't hesitate to reach out to a healthcare professional.

Activities for discussing healthy menstruation



Game idea – The Red Flag Game

How to Play:

- Read different period scenarios out loud (e.g., "Your period suddenly stops for three months"or "Your flow is so heavy you soak through a pad in an hour").
- Players hold up a red flag 🚩 if they think it's something that should be checked by a doctor.
- Discuss why certain period changes might be signs of health conditions.

Quiz – Is Your Period Normal? When to see a doctor

This quiz helps young people identify when period symptoms are normal and when they should seek medical care. See Resource Drive for the quiz questions.

For more activities see the resource drive.

"Girls around my age asked each other whether anyone within our circle had already gotten their period. Mine came a night I'll never forget. I went to pee, and then I saw the big, brown stain on my undies. Nobody had told me it hurt. And worse, the first periods are irregular. I kept wondering why it lasted more than the four days they had taught me. Months later, my mom noticed my period calendar in passing by. She saw how I had marked four crosses every month and asked if I was being that regular. Of course, I wasn't, and it took months of brownish gunk to start bleeding actual blood."

Kaeru, Spain

Topic 4: Myths and taboos

Menstrual stigmas, myths, and taboos are a serious concern because they contribute to misinformation, shame, and barriers to menstrual health and equity. Stigma discourages open conversations, leaving many women and girls without accurate information about their own bodies, which can lead to poor menstrual hygiene, health risks, and feelings of embarrassment. Myths – such as the idea that menstruation is impure or that period blood is dirty – reinforce discrimination, causing exclusion from school, work, and social activities in some cultures. Taboos can also limit access to menstrual products and healthcare, worsening period equity. Addressing these issues is essential for gender equality, public health, and ensuring that menstruation is treated as a normal and natural process.

How to challenge menstrual myths and taboos

Challenging menstrual stigma requires open conversations, education, and inclusive policies. Normalising discussions in schools, workplaces, and communities helps break the silence, while fact-based education for all genders dispels myths and fosters understanding. Ensuring access to free and affordable period products



tackles period equity, while engaging men and boys in the conversation reduces shame and misinformation. It's also essential to challenge harmful cultural norms that exclude or shame women, girls and those who menstruate and to use media and advocacy to promote menstrual equity. By addressing these issues, we can build a society where periods are seen as a normal, healthy part of life, free from stigma and barriers.

"I hate how much stigma and weirdness there is around periods. Every time I'm in a public toilet (like a mall or a bar), I'm so ashamed to change my pad."
PS, The Netherlands

Common menstrual stigmas

Menstrual stigmas and taboos vary across cultures but often stem from misinformation and deep-rooted societal norms. Some common ones include:

- **Secrecy and shame** – Many people are taught to hide their periods, leading to embarrassment and silence around menstruation.
- **Impurity and uncleanliness** – Some cultures consider menstruating individuals impure, restricting them from religious spaces, kitchens, or social interactions.

"I remember the first time I got my period I told my best friend with a code word because we were embarrassed that people would hear us talk about it."
Clara, Spain

- **Invisibility in public discourse** – Menstruation is rarely discussed openly in media, workplaces, or schools, reinforcing the idea that it is a private or shameful matter.
- **Associations with weakness** – Some believe periods make individuals emotionally unstable or physically weak, contributing to gender discrimination.
- **Restrictions on activities** – Myths discourage women, girls and those who menstruate from exercising, swimming, or touching certain foods while on their period.

Breaking these taboos through education and open conversation can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for women, girls and all women, girls and those who menstruate.

Changing attitudes to menstruation over time

Attitudes toward menstruation have come a long way, shaped by cultural shifts, scientific understanding, and social movements. In ancient times, periods were seen in different ways—some cultures viewed them as a sign of fertility and power, while others created strict rules that isolated women and girls. As time went on, especially during the Middle Ages, periods became more of a taboo, with myths about impurity and illness leading to secrecy and shame.

By the 19th and early 20th centuries, menstruation was barely talked about—it was considered private, even embarrassing. The rise of commercial period products helped normalise managing periods but also reinforced the idea that they should be hidden. Thankfully, things started changing in the late 20th century, with feminist movements and public health campaigns pushing for open conversations, menstrual equity, and recognition of period products as essential healthcare.

Today, menstrual activism is stronger than ever, with growing awareness of sustainable products, inclusivity, and affordability. While progress has been made, stigma and barriers still exist, and it's up to all of us to keep challenging outdated taboos and ensuring periods are treated as the natural, normal process they are.



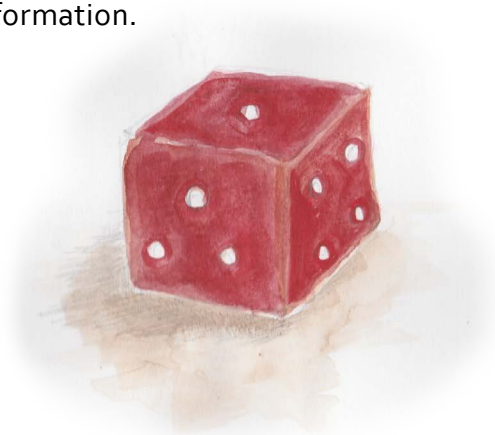
Activity ideas for discussing and challenging menstrual myths and taboos

Game idea – Myth or Fact?

- **How to Play:** Write common menstrual myths and facts on separate cards. Players take turns drawing a card, reading it aloud, and deciding

whether it is a myth or a fact. The group discusses the answer. This can also be used a moving debate.

- **Example:** "You can't get pregnant while on your period." (Myth!). See Resources drive for a list of common myths.
- **Goal:** Debunk myths and provide accurate information.



Discussion idea – Cultural Perspectives Discussion

- Explore how different cultures view menstruation, highlighting both positive traditions and harmful taboos.
- Encourage participants to research and share period-related customs from around the world.

Game idea – The Cost of Periods

- **How to Play:** Give participants a limited budget and ask them to "buy" menstrual products. Introduce challenges like period poverty, taxes on products, or lack of access to clean facilities.
- **Goal:** Raise awareness about period poverty and menstrual equity.

Game idea – Menstrual Timeline Game

- **How to Play:** Players arrange historical period product adverts and facts about menstruation in chronological order.
- **Goal:** Show how menstrual products and attitudes have evolved over time, and how stigmas and taboos were formed and reinforced in the media.

These activities create a fun, interactive way to challenge menstrual myths, normalise discussions, and promote menstrual equity.

»I remember being about 15 and having girls over at my house for a sleepover. Periods and period products were very much a taboo subject, my mom did her best to try to talk to me about them but I could tell she was uncomfortable and so never asked questions or looked for any information. One of the girls asked for a tampon, I thought this was an umbrella word for all period products and so I gave her a pad, and she had to tell me that's not the same thing. I felt pretty embarrassed. Given the taboo and general discomfort within my family around discussing anything period related, I essentially functioned as if periods weren't happening. Things are much better now in terms of products being available in public bathrooms, but when I was a teenager I was both too broke (had no income whatsoever) and too embarrassed to buy pads.«

Aoife, Ireland

Topic 5: The environmental and health impacts of menstruation

Menstrual products play a crucial role in health and hygiene, but many menstrual product options come with significant health and environmental risks. Understanding these impacts can help individuals make informed choices and advocate for safer, more sustainable alternatives. Through our choices we can make a difference to our own health and to the planet.



Switching to reusable menstrual products is a powerful act of climate action. Every year, billions of disposable pads and tampons end up in landfills and oceans, contributing to plastic pollution and carbon emissions. By choosing menstrual cups and discs, reusable pads, and period underwear, you reduce waste, conserve resources, and lessen your environmental footprint. These sustainable choices not only protect the planet but also promote long-term affordability and accessibility. Small changes, like rethinking our period care, add up to a healthier earth and a more sustainable future for all.

Health impacts of single-use menstrual products



Single-use menstrual products, such as pads and tampons, can have various health impacts due to the materials and chemicals they contain. While these products are widely used there are a lot of unknowns around the chemicals found in these products and a lack of transparency around ingredients used. Increasing awareness of their potential health effects has led many to explore organic or reusable alternatives for a healthier and more sustainable option. Here are some of the potential health concerns of commonly used menstrual products:

"Three years ago, I switched to a menstrual cup, and since then, I feel like a new person. My period has become so much simpler, without the stress of constantly buying and changing disposable pads or tampons. What matters most to me is that I no longer create huge amounts of waste every month. It's sad how the system has conditioned us to rely on single-use products, presenting them as the only option, even though there are more sustainable and healthier alternatives. The freedom, practicality, and the fact that my choice reduces my environmental footprint make the menstrual cup the best decision I've ever made for both my body and the planet."
Dora, Croatia

Exposure to harmful chemicals

Many disposable pads and tampons contain up to 90% plastic, made from petrochemicals that can release hormone-disrupting substances. Endocrine or hormone disrupting chemical can affect our hormones even in very small amounts. They disrupt our body's endocrine system which governs every aspect of life. Phthalates and plasticisers (such as bisphenol A and S) are known to interfere with hormone function and can leach into the body during use.

Recent studies have also found toxic metals like lead, arsenic, and cadmium in tampons, which are linked to reproductive issues and cancer.

PFAS ("Forever Chemicals")

Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) have been found in 48% of sanitary pads and 22% of tampons. These chemicals do not break down in the body or environment and are associated with hormonal imbalances, reproductive problems, and immune disorders. It is important to note that PFAS has also been found in several brands of period pants – So it's necessary to ensure that when selecting a brand of period pants they clearly state that they do not contain PFAS.

Fragrances & other additives

Many menstrual products contain synthetic fragrances, which can be compiled from a list of up to 3,000 chemicals, some of which are classified as carcinogenic, neurotoxic, or endocrine-disrupting. These chemicals can also cause allergic reactions or disrupt the vaginal pH balance, increasing the risk of infections.

Tampons are also bleached with chlorine based bleaches, which can produce dioxins (especially if elemental chlorine is used). Many dioxins are carcinogens and persistent organic pollutants (POPs)—toxic chemicals that remain in the environment and accumulate in human tissue and wildlife. While organic brands use a Totally Chlorine Free (TCF) method, which omits chlorine use entirely, and instead uses hydrogen peroxide or ozone bleach, most conventional brands do not disclose their bleaching processes.

Lack of transparency & regulation

Manufacturers are not legally required to disclose all ingredients in menstrual products. This lack of transparency makes it difficult for consumers to assess their exposure to harmful

substances. In response, some U.S. states like Vermont, California, and Colorado are working to ban PFAS and other harmful chemicals in menstrual products.

Environmental impacts of single-use menstrual products

Plastic waste & marine pollution

Disposable menstrual products are a major source of plastic pollution. In the UK alone, around 2 billion pads, tampons, and applicators are flushed down the toilet each year, leading to sewer blockages and marine pollution.

These products are one of the ten most common types of litter found on European beaches. Over time, they break down into microplastics, which harm marine life, including fish, seabirds, and whales.

Carbon footprint & climate impact

The production of single-use menstrual products emits approximately 245,000 tonnes of CO_2 annually, worsening climate change.

Massive Waste Generation

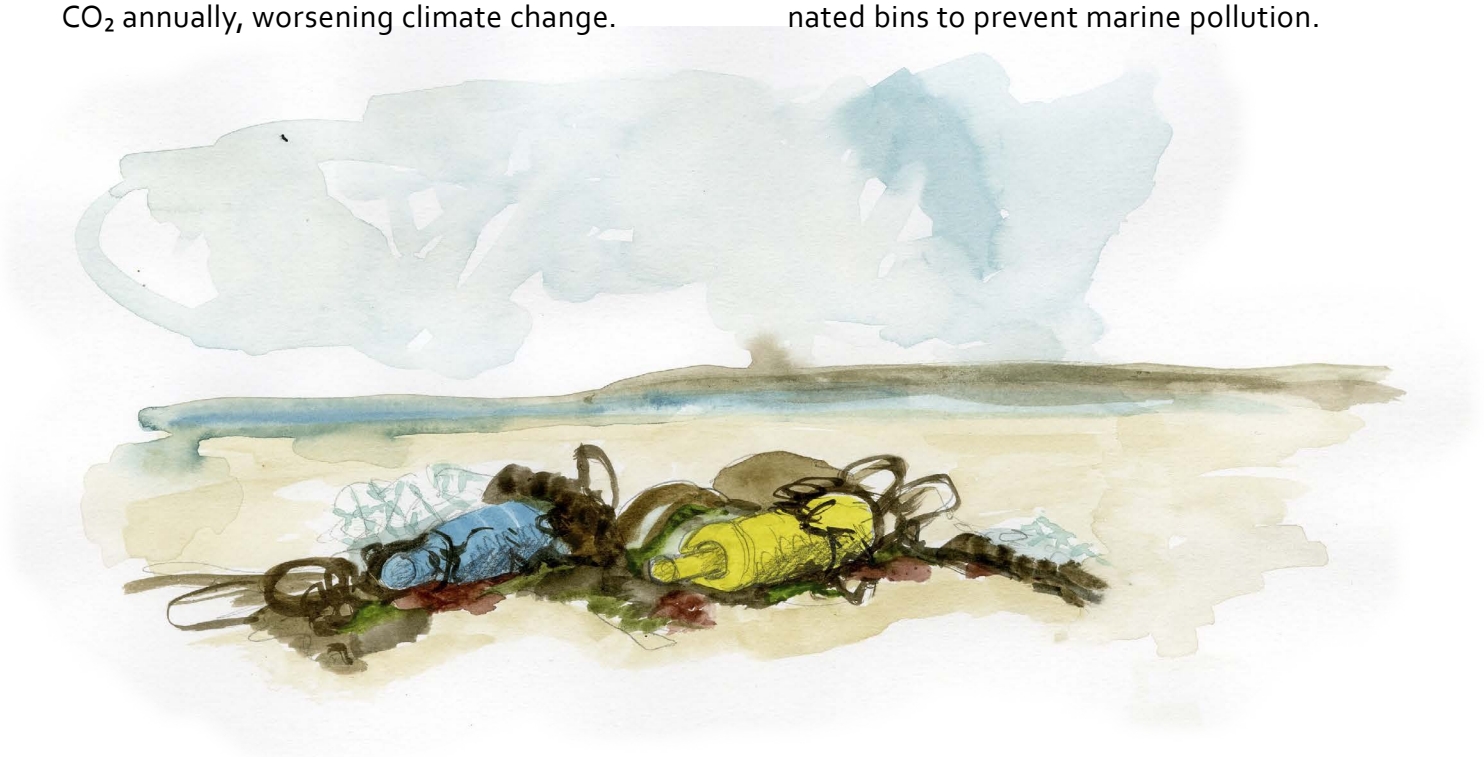
In 2017, people in the EU used about 50 billion disposable menstrual products, creating 590,000 tonnes of waste – equivalent to the weight of 3,000 blue whales.

Women and people who menstruate use more than 11,000 disposable menstrual products in their lifetime – based on an average of 38 years of menstruating using 22 items of menstrual products per cycle, with 13 cycles per year.

Safer & more sustainable alternatives

To reduce health risks and environmental damage, consider switching to:

- **Reusable products** – Menstrual cups or discs, reusable pads, and period underwear significantly cut down on waste.
- **Organic disposable products** – Plastic-free and made without harmful chemicals.
- **Proper disposal** – Never flush menstrual products; instead, dispose of them in designated bins to prevent marine pollution.



By choosing safer, more eco-friendly alternatives, we can protect both our health and the planet.

Activities for discussing the impact of menstruation on the environment and health

Game idea – Label Detective

- **How to Play:** Provide real packaging from different menstrual products and challenge teens to find (or not find!) ingredient lists, safety warnings, and certifications.
- **Goal:** Teach media literacy and encourage checking labels for safer choices.



"Although we are very advanced in terms of reusable menstrual products, facilities are often not prepared for this. Many times, when traveling, I have found that I cannot clean my menstrual cup properly because the water sink is outside the toilet. This has meant that I have to wrap the menstrual cup in toilet paper, so that I can clean it outside."
Queralt, Catalonia (Spain)

Creative idea – Creative Awareness Campaign

- **How to Play:** Teens create a short video, infographic, or poster highlighting health and environmental concerns linked to disposable menstrual products and promoting safer alternatives.
- **Goal:** Inspire peer education and advocacy.

Topic 6: Period product options

Factors to consider when choosing a period product

When choosing a menstrual product, it's important to consider comfort, health, affordability, environmental impact, and accessibility.

Comfort & personal preference

- **Fit & feel:** Some people prefer the security of pads, while others like the internal protection of tampons or cups.
- **Lifestyle considerations:** Active individuals (e.g., athletes, swimmers) may find tampons, cups, or period underwear more convenient.
- **Absorbency needs:** Consider how heavy or light your flow is and choose a product with appropriate absorbency. Two products can be used together in the case of a heavy flow, for example using a menstrual cup with a pair of period pants.

Health impacts

- **Allergies & Sensitivities:** Some pads and tampons contain fragrances, dyes, or synthetic materials that may cause irritation.
- **Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS) Risk:** Toxic shock syndrome (TSS) is a rare but life-threatening condition caused by an infection. It can happen when using a tampon or menstrual cup, or from an infected wound. Symptoms develop quickly and you need urgent treatment. Tampons and menstrual cups require proper hygiene and changing/emptying at recommended intervals.
- **Kidney impacts:** Correct positioning of menstrual cups, along with choosing the correct cup shape and size, is important to prevent very rare negative effects on the upper urinary tract.

Cost & Accessibility

- **Budget-Friendly Options:** Disposable products may seem cheaper upfront, but reusable options (e.g., menstrual cups, cloth pads, and period underwear) save money over time.
- **Availability:** Some products may be harder to find in certain locations, so accessibility is important.

Environmental & Climate Impact

Carbon Footprint of Menstrual Products

- The production, transportation, and disposal of disposable period products contribute to carbon emissions.
- Manufacturing pads and tampons produces 245,000 tonnes of CO_2 annually, worsening climate change.

Plastic Waste & Marine Pollution

- Some period products can contain up to 90% plastic, and many tampons come with plastic applicators and wrappers.

"Nowadays, there are the menstrual pants, also washable and reusable, but much more comfortable and practical. These are revolutionary. My menstrual life is simply comfortable since I used those. There are many local sustainable brands out there nowadays, fortunately. I recommend them 100%, for any woman: do yourself a favour and start using these."
Teresa, Portugal

- In the UK alone, between 1.5–2 billion menstrual products are flushed down toilets yearly, leading to sewer blockages and marine pollution.
- Period products and wet wipes are in the list of the top 10 most commonly found items on Europe's beaches.
- Plastic doesn't fully degrade like organic materials (e.g., food or paper). Instead, it breaks down into smaller and smaller pieces over time, eventually becoming microplastics – tiny plastic particles less than 5mm in size. These microplastics persist in the environment for hundreds or even thousands of years, polluting water, soil, and even the air. They can enter the food chain, affecting wildlife and potentially human health. So while plastic may seem to "disappear" over time, it's really just breaking apart rather than breaking down. Microplastics from the breakdown of period products have been found in sewage outlets in Ireland and billions of microscopic pieces of plastic are released per tampon during use and disposal, working out at 86 trillion fibres over a lifetime's use.

Chemical Pollution & Environmental Toxins

- **PFAS:** PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances) have been found in some disposable pads, tampons, and even period underwear. These "forever chemicals" are linked to health risks like hormone disruption and reproductive issues. Studies show that about 22% of tampons and 48% of pads, liners, and incontinence products contain PFAS. Additionally, some period underwear brands have tested positive for PFAS, particularly in moisture-wicking layers. To reduce exposure when using tampons or pads, choose organic cotton products, PFAS-free brands. When buying period underwear, look for third-party testing certifications to ensure they are PFAS-free and avoid pants with antimicrobial or anti-odour additives.
- **Toxic metals:** Recent studies have detected toxic metals, including lead, arsenic, and cadmium, in various tampon brands. These metals are known to pose significant health risks.
- **Phthalates:** Endocrine disrupting chemicals such as phthalates have been found in some period products. These chemicals have been linked to hormonal disruption, reproductive health issues, and cancer risks. Choosing organic, unbleached, and fragrance-free products can help reduce exposure.

Sustainable Menstrual Options

- **Menstrual cups** (silicone-based, reusable for years, zero waste)
- **Menstrual discs** (silicone-based, reusable for years, zero waste)

- **Reusable cloth pads** (washable, long-lasting, reduces landfill waste)
- **Period underwear** (absorbent, reusable, eco-friendly, reduces landfill waste)
- **Biodegradable tampons & pads** (made from organic cotton, plastic-free)

Convenience & Maintenance

- **Ease of Use:** Some people find tampons or cups tricky at first, while others prefer their convenience over bulky pads.
- **Cleaning & Storage:** Reusable products require washing and in the case of cloth pads and period pants drying, which may not be practical in all situations.
- **Travel Considerations:** If access to clean water or disposal facilities is limited, some products may be more practical than others.

Inclusivity & Special Needs

- **Menstrual Needs for Different Bodies:** People with disabilities, trans men, and non-binary individuals may have specific needs or preferences.
- **Adaptive Products:** Some companies offer easy-to-use products designed for people with mobility challenges.

Cultural & Religious Considerations

Some cultural or religious beliefs may influence preferences for certain menstrual products. For example, some individuals prefer external products like pads over internal options like tampons or menstrual cups.

Period products – disability and accessibility



Menstrual product choices can have a significant impact on people with disabilities, as different products present unique challenges and benefits. For those with physical disabilities, inserting tampons or menstrual cups may be difficult due to limited dexterity or mobility, making pads or period underwear more accessible options. On the other hand, some women, girls or others who menstruate with sensory sensitivities may find disposable pads uncomfortable due to texture or adhesives and may prefer reusable cloth pads or cups. Intellectual disabilities can also influence menstrual care, as some women or girls may need extra support with remembering to change products regularly or may benefit from simplified routines, such as using absorbent period underwear. Accessibility in menstrual health should include education, adaptable products, and support systems to ensure that everyone can manage their periods with dignity and comfort.

Period product options

Menstrual Cups: A Sustainable alternative to tampons

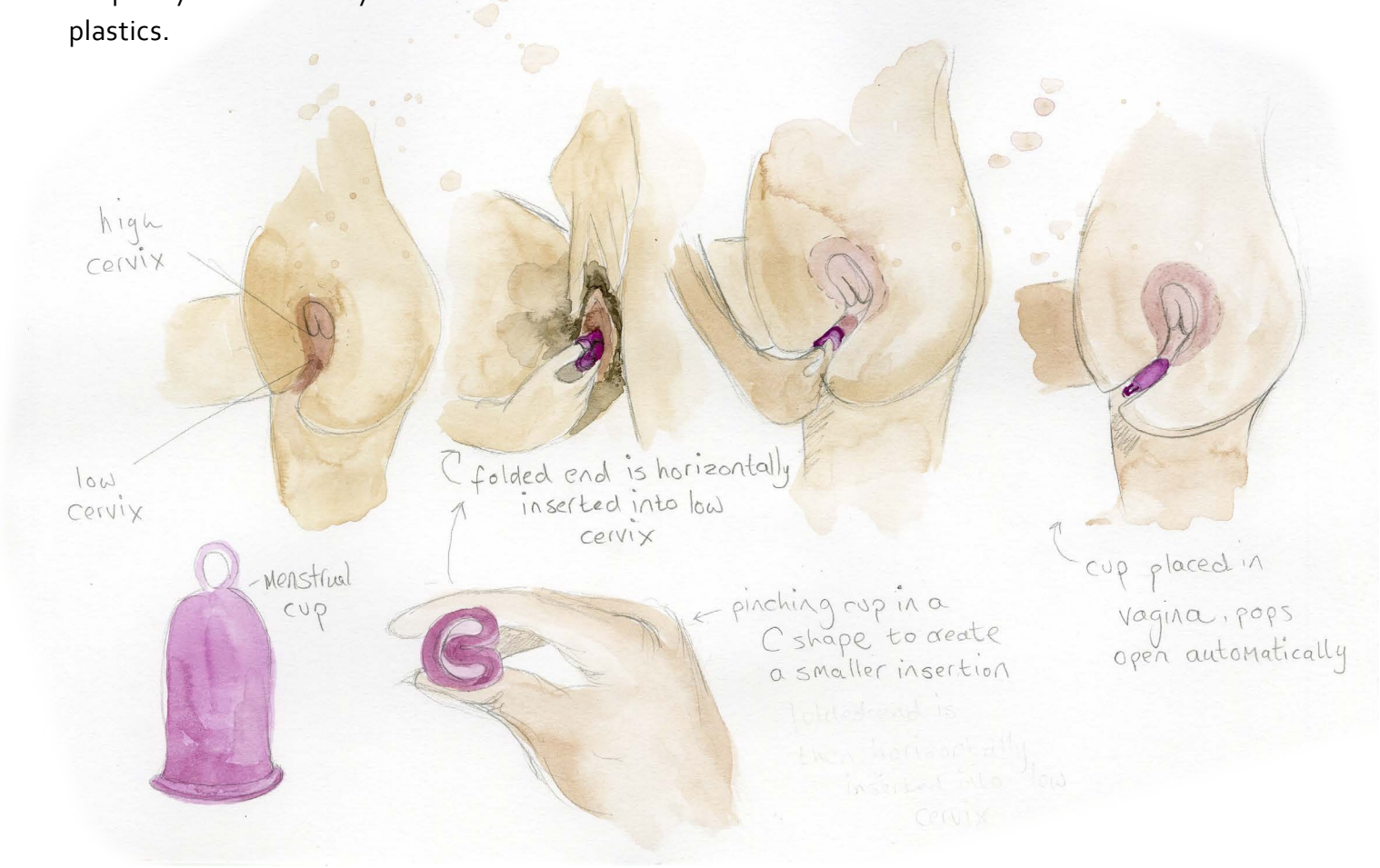
What is a Menstrual Cup?

A menstrual cup is a flexible, reusable cup inserted into the vagina to collect (not absorb) menstrual blood. It can hold 8–50ml of fluid and is typically bell-shaped. It is a great option for those looking for an ecofriendly and safe alternative to tampons! You only need one menstrual cup and it lasts for up to 10 years – making it great for the environment and a great way to save money!

Look for medical-grade silicone cups, as lower-quality materials may contain harmful plastics.

How to Use a Menstrual Cup

- Before & After Use: Sterilize by boiling in water for 4-6 minutes.
- Insertion: Wash hands, fold the cup into a C-shape, and insert it while sitting, standing, or squatting. Insert the folded cup into your vagina, aiming it towards your lower back.
- It should unfold and create a vacuum to prevent leaks.
- There are many other common folds in addition to the C-shape. Details of these are easy to find online.
- Wearing Time: Can stay in for between 8 and 12 hours





- Removal: Wash hands, relax muscles, gently pinch the base to break the seal, and remove. Empty contents into the toilet, rinse, and reinsert or sterilize.

Choosing the Right Cup

- **Material:** Medical grade silicone is the best material to select when choosing a menstrual cup.
- **Cervix Height:** Choose low, medium, or high cups based on cervical position. If necessary you can cut off the end of the cup's stem if it feels too long.
- **Size:** Most cups come in two sizes. A small size for those who have not given birth vaginally or who are under 30. A large size for those who have had a vaginal birth or who are over 30.
- **Flow:** Wider cups hold more fluid for heavier periods.
- **Firmness:** Harder cups for active lifestyles, softer cups for those with cramps.
- Avoid any self sterilising cups

Menstrual cups are a safe, cost-effective, and sustainable period option for those willing to try a reusable alternative.

Reusable Cloth Pads: A Sustainable Alternative to disposable pads

What Are They?

A menstrual pad is a soft, absorbent product worn inside your underwear to absorb menstrual blood. Cloth pads look like disposables but are made from cotton, wool, or linen, often with a waterproof layer to prevent leaks. They attach to underwear with metal or plastic poppers.

How to Use & Care

- Wear them just as you would wear disposable pads
- Change every 3-4 hours
- Store used pads in a waterproof wet bag
- Rinse with cold water before machine washing (they can go in with the rest of your clothes and will not cause staining!)
- Avoid fabric softener, ironing, or using a dryer–they reduce absorbency

Choosing the Right One

Cloth pads come in different sizes and absorbencies (light, heavy, overnight, postnatal). Start with a set of 5 to find what works best for you.



Reusable pads offer comfort, sustainability, and savings and are a great option for those looking for an ecofriendly alternative to disposable pads.



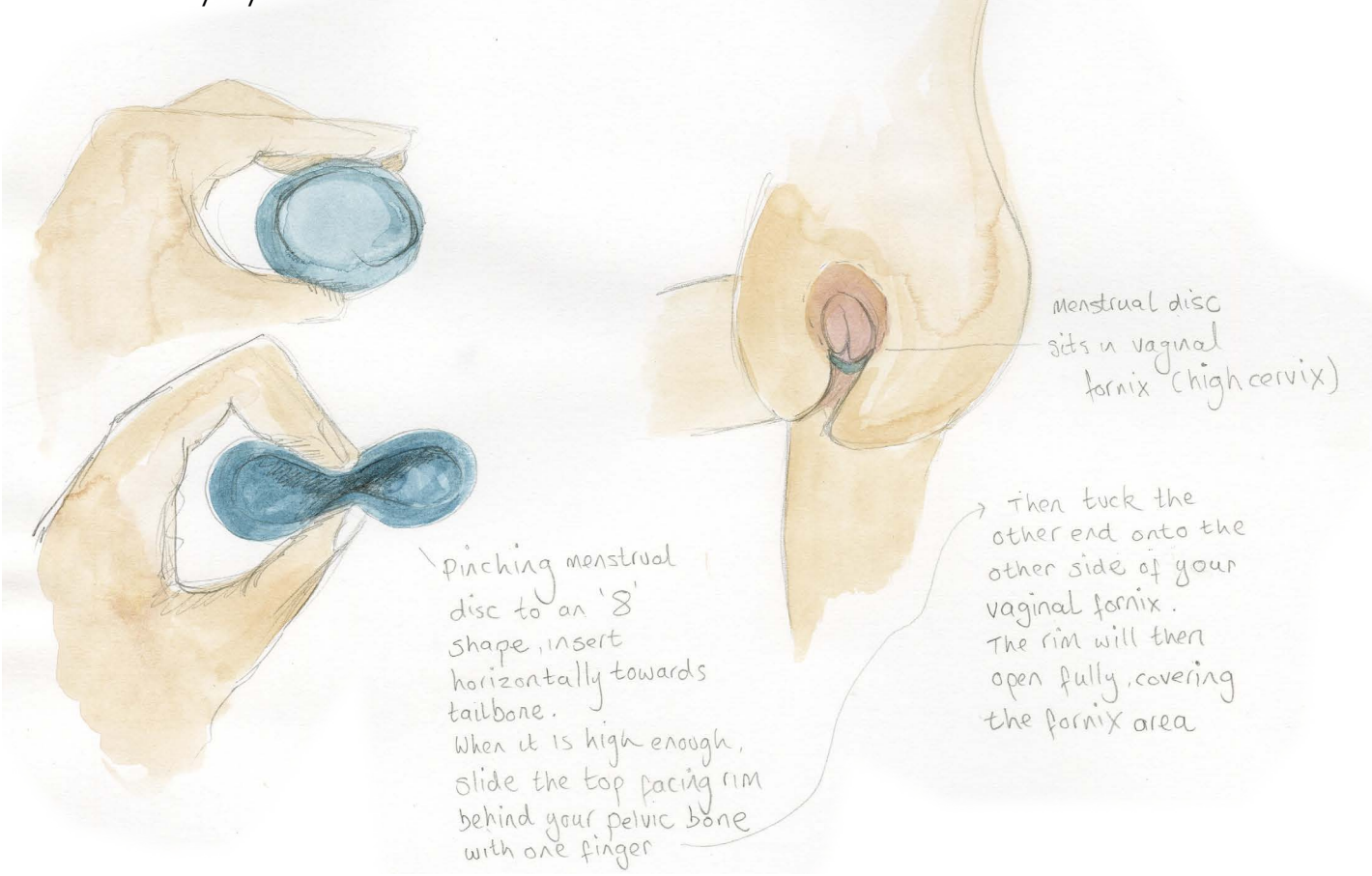
Period Underwear: A Comfortable, Reusable Option

What Is It?

Period underwear looks like regular underwear but has absorbent layers and a leak-proof membrane. Some styles include bamboo layers for extra absorption. Menstrual swimsuits are also available for water-friendly protection. Period underwear can last between 2 to 5 years.

How to Use & Care

- Wear just like regular underwear. You can choose a style you find most comfortable!
- Change based on flow, depending upon your flow they may need to be changed between every 4 to 12 hours
- Store used pairs in a waterproof wet bag
- Rinse with cold water before machine washing (they can go in with the rest of your clothes and will not cause staining!)
- Avoid fabric softener, ironing, or dryers – they reduce absorbency and fabric softner can irritate the delicate skin of the vulva



Choosing the Right One

- Select based on underwear size & flow level
- For a full cycle: 5-7 pairs
- As a backup for a menstrual cup: 2-3 pairs
- Choose organic cotton, avoid anti-odor or antimicrobial additives or brands using PFAS

Menstrual Disc: An Alternative to Tampons



What Is It?

A menstrual disc is a flat, flexible disc that collects blood. It sits below the cervix in the vagina and can be left in during sex.

How to Use & Care

- Sterilize before and after use by boiling in water for 4-6 minutes
- To insert, pinch the disc and insert it back and down past the pubic bone
- Can stay in for up to 12 hours, but doctors recommend changing every 3-4 hours
- To remove, hook the rim with your finger, rinse, and clean with fragrance free soap

Choosing the Right One

Most menstrual discs are **one size fits all.**

Tampons: An Absorbent disposable menstrual product

What is it?

A tampon is inserted into the vagina to absorb menstrual blood. Once inserted correctly it expands as it soaks up blood and stays in place during use.

How to use and care

- Unwrap the tampon and hold the applicator or string.
- Insert the tampon into your vagina, aiming it toward your lower back.
- Push it in until your fingers are close to your body.
- Remove the applicator (if using one) and make sure the tampon is in place.
- To remove, pull the string gently and dispose of the tampon in the bin (never flush tampons down the toilet).
- Change it every 4-6 hours.



Disposable menstrual Pads

What is it?

A menstrual pad is a soft, absorbent product worn inside your underwear to absorb menstrual blood.

How to use it

- Peel off the backing and place the pad in your underwear.
- Adjust it to fit comfortably.
- Change the pad every 3-4 hours or when it's full.
- Dispose of the used pad in a waste bin (not the toilet).

Organic disposables: A Better Choice for disposables

Organic tampons and pads are made from natural cotton without pesticides or harmful chemicals, making them safer for your body and the environment.



Benefits

- **Toxic chemical-free:** No harmful pesticides or dyes
- **Hypoallergenic:** Better for sensitive skin
- **Eco-friendly:** Supports sustainable farming practices

"I was sharing a house with a girl who used a menstrual cup, and since it was something I had already been researching (as I didn't feel comfortable with the waste I produced every month as a result of my menstruation), I decided to try it. And I was amazed! The freedom I felt was incredible and much more hygienic. By cleaning the cup well before, during and after use, imbalances in the vaginal flora became increasingly rare. Since I work with sewing, I also ended up experimenting with making my own reusable menstrual pads, as well as period panties. All this, I believe, makes me feel more close to my body and more in touch with my period."
Ana, Portugal

Comparison of period products

The best menstrual product depends on individual needs, but considering health, sustainability, and climate impact can help make an informed decision. Choosing reusable and plastic-free options whenever possible benefits both personal well-being and the planet.

Product	Pros	Cons	Climate & Environmental Impact	Chemical Risks
Disposable pads	Easy to use, good for all flows, widely available	Can feel bulky, less eco-friendly, can shift during movement	High plastic waste, degrades into microplastics if not plastic free	May contain dioxins, PFAS, fragrances if pads not organic
Tampons	Good for active lifestyles, various absorbencies	Risk of TSS, requires insertion, disposal concerns	Degrades into microplastics if not plastic free. Microplastic pollution in oceans, toxic waste	PFAS, fragrance, toxic chemicals and endocrine disrupting chemicals, dioxins
Menstrual Cups	Reusable for 5+ years, eco-friendly, cost-effective, good for active lifestyles	Requires cleaning, learning curve for insertion/removal	No waste, low carbon footprint	No known chemical risks (medical-grade silicone). However there are health issues associated with incorrect insertion, removal and cleaning
Period Underwear	Reusable, comfortable, great backup option	Can be expensive initially, needs regular washing	Lower waste, reduces disposable product use	Some brands contain PFAS – Avoid any underwear with additives, check any trade marked ingredients
Reusable Cloth Pads	Eco-friendly, cost-saving, customizable	Requires washing, can feel bulky	Reduces landfill waste, no plastic pollution	Reduced risk of harmful chemicals if products are certified organic

Eco-certificates

Eco-certificates are certifications awarded to products or companies that meet specific environmental and sustainability standards. These certifications aim to promote eco-friendly practices and help consumers make informed, environmentally conscious choices.

Certified Organic: Guarantees that products are made from organic materials, free from synthetic pesticides or fertilizers.

Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS): Specifically for textiles, ensuring organic materials, social responsibility, and eco-friendly production processes.

EU Ecolabel: A European certification for products and services that meet high environmental standards across their lifecycle.

OEKO-TEX Standard 100: This certification tests textiles for most harmful substances and ensures that they are safe for human use. It covers everything from raw materials to finished products and is especially important for products that come in direct contact with skin, like clothing.

BCI (Better Cotton Initiative): This certification focuses on sustainable cotton farming. It aims to improve cotton farming practices globally by promoting better environmental, social, and economic conditions.

Activites to support discussions around period product options



Creative idea – DIY Period Product Crafting

Activity: For the crafty teens, provide materials to create DIY reusable pads. Teens can follow a simple tutorial to create their own, learning more about how reusable products work.

Objective: This hands-on approach helps teens understand how reusable products are made and used, giving them a more personal connection to these sustainable options.

Creative idea – Custom Product Branding

Activity: Have teens create a new brand for a period product of their choice. They should come up with a logo, catchy name, marketing tagline, and even a unique selling point for their product.

Objective: Teens will get creative while learning about the various factors that go into designing a product that appeals to different needs and preferences.

Reflection idea – "Period Product Diaries"

Activity: Have teens keep a "Period Product Diary" for a week where they track their experiences with different products (if they've used multiple). They can write down feelings about comfort, leaks, convenience, and how easy the products are to use.

Objective: This creative activity encourages teens to reflect and notice how products work for them in real life.

Quiz idea – What's Your Period Personality?

Activity: See Resource Drive for quiz questions

Objective: To help teens think about their personal needs when selecting a period product.

Conclusion: Advancing menstrual literacy for a healthier, more equitable future

Menstrual literacy is more than just understanding periods – it is about empowerment, equity, and sustainability. As a youth leader, you have the power to create a period-positive culture that empowers young people and promotes sustainability. As we conclude this journey, it is important to reflect on the knowledge gained and how it can be applied to create a society where menstruation is openly discussed, free from stigma, and properly supported through education and policy.

Recap of key learnings

Throughout this guide, we have explored the biological, social, and cultural aspects of menstruation, breaking down myths and uncovering the realities of menstrual health. Key takeaways include:

- **Understanding the menstrual cycle** – Recognising how hormonal changes affect physical and emotional well-being.
- **Menstrual product choices** – Exploring period product options, especially reusable menstrual items, their benefits, and their health and environmental impact.
- **Health & well-being** – Learning how diet, exercise, and healthcare support menstrual health.
- **Breaking the stigma** – Recognizing historical taboos and how to challenge them through open conversations.
- **Menstrual equity & social justice** – Understanding period poverty, the need for free and accessible period products, and policy efforts to ensure menstrual rights for all.

By equipping individuals with this knowledge, we empower them to manage their menstrual health with confidence and advocate for broader systemic changes.

Empowerment & social change

Menstrual literacy is a tool for empowerment. When women, girls and those who menstruate understand their bodies, they can make informed decisions about their health, well-being, and personal product choices.

However, empowerment extends beyond the individual – it is also about social change. Menstruation has long been shrouded in stigma, making it a human rights and gender equality issue. To create a society where menstruation is treated as a normal, healthy function, we must:

- **Encourage inclusive education** – Schools, workplaces, and communities should provide comprehensive menstrual education to all genders to break the cycle of misinformation and shame.
- **Support policy change** – Advocating for free period products in public spaces, including schools and workplaces, can address period poverty and ensure access for all.

- **Promote open conversations** – Talking about periods without embarrassment helps normalise them and encourages a culture of understanding and support.

True empowerment happens when menstruation is no longer a barrier to education, work, or daily life.

Sustainability & future actions

Sustainability is a crucial part of menstrual literacy. Every year, billions of disposable period products contribute to waste and pollution. Understanding the impact of single-use menstrual products and exploring eco-friendly alternatives is essential for a healthier planet.

Key sustainability considerations include:

- **Reusable products** such as menstrual cups and discs, cloth pads, and period underwear, which can significantly reduce waste. Organic plastic free disposables are another option to reduce the environmental impact associated with single use plastics.
- **Chemical safety** – Avoiding menstrual products that contain PFAS, pesticides, and synthetic fragrances to prioritise both personal health and environmental safety.

By making sustainable menstrual choices, women, girls and those who menstruate can help combat environmental harm while also advocating for safer, more accessible period care.

Breaking Stigma & advocacy

Menstrual stigma still affects millions of women, girls and people who menstruate worldwide, leading to misinformation, embarrassment, and lack of access to necessary products and healthcare. Advocacy is key to dismantling these barriers.

Ways to Challenge Menstrual Stigma:

- **Educate all genders** – When boys and men understand menstruation, they become allies in ending stigma and discrimination.
- **Encourage workplaces & schools to be period-friendly** – Establish policies that provide free menstrual products and allow for flexible time off for menstrual discomfort.
- **Use media & storytelling** – Sharing real-life experiences through blogs, documentaries, and social media campaigns can help break the silence around menstruation.

Advocacy can take many forms, from individual action (like having open conversations with friends and family) to systemic change (supporting policies that provide period products in public spaces). Every voice matters in the fight for menstrual equity.

Resources & Continued learning

Please see the Resources Drive for links to other supports and resources you can point young people towards.

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