



# The Impact of Menstrual Health at University

March 2026



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## Referencing

If you wish to reference this report, please use 'Exeter Students' Guild' as the author/organisation.

## Key Dates

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## Introduction

In July 2025, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) published a report titled 'The hidden impact of menstruation in higher education'. This report uncovered that students who menstruate miss an average of 10 study days per academic year due to menstrual symptoms, increasing to 19 days for those with diagnosed menstrual health conditions, such as endometriosis or uterine fibroids.<sup>1</sup>

This means that students who menstruate lose, on average, between a month and a half and just under three months of academic study over a three-year degree.

Despite this, 85% of higher education providers do not have a specific menstruation policy.<sup>2</sup>

As a result of this HEPI report, Guild Officers commissioned Exeter-specific research into the impact of menstruation on academic life to support the addition of menstruation policies and support for students at the University of Exeter and to better understand how this issue impacts Exeter students.

The Guild released an anonymous survey on Friday 20<sup>th</sup> February 2026 which was open for two weeks for all students who menstruate; ten students who completed the survey were randomly selected to win a £10 voucher as a prize.

Over these two weeks, 494 students opened the survey; we received 59 partial responses and 435 full responses.

This survey purposely avoided using gendered language and asking about students gender identity in an effort to ensure all students who menstruate felt comfortable participating and being honest in their answers. Instead, a focus was put on whether or not students had menstrual health condition and how that impacts their experience.

## Summary

Because of menstruation:

- 96% of students find it more difficult to focus in class
- 97% of students find it more difficult to study for/complete assignments
- 92% of students find it more difficult to focus in an exam

Because of menstruation:

- 85% of students have missed a class
- 53% of students have missed an assignment deadline
- 27% of students have missed an exam

Students with a diagnosed or suspected menstrual health condition reported missing classes, deadlines, and exams more-so than students with no menstrual health condition.

The primary symptoms that students reported causing them to miss classes, deadlines and exams were pain, followed by the impact menstruation has on their mental health, and then the heaviness of their flow. Very few students reported lack of access to menstrual products, which is positive.

Text comments revealed that students struggle with focus and concentration during menstruation. Many students report missing lectures or feeling distracted during them for many reasons, including physical pain, or fear of leaking (especially in longer lectures with no breaks). Students felt that because of needing to miss classes, they often felt that their menstrual cycle meant they were behind their peers or weren't able to perform at their best. This was felt to be especially frustrating when assignments were due or exams set to take place.

Students also spoke about the impacts of menstruation outside of their periods, with many noting how they felt disadvantaged due to symptoms that could impact them for weeks.

Only 23% of students would feel comfortable talking to university staff about the impact menstruation is having on their studies.

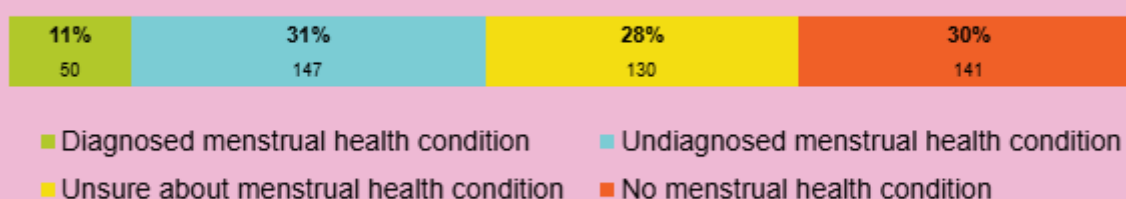
Only 21% of students feel the university supports them with their menstrual health.

Text comments revealed that students feel that lecturers/the University don't see menstruation as a valid reason for missing lectures or requiring mitigation. This leads to students feeling that they need to make up alternate, more acceptable reasons, or they simply don't speak up. Students feel that menstruation is a taboo topic to discuss with academic staff, even when it is negatively impacting them.

## Analysis

As highlighted in the HEPI report, experiences for those students who have menstrual health conditions often differ compared to those who don't, so students were first asked to declare if they had a diagnosed menstrual health condition.

### Students with a Menstrual Health Condition



28% of students reported either being unsure as to whether they have a menstrual health condition and 31% reported suspecting that they do but having no formal diagnosis. This highlights both the lack of wide-spread information about menstrual health conditions which is leaving students unsure as to whether or not the symptoms they are experiencing are regular or irregular, and the difficulty of securing a formal diagnosis for a menstrual health condition.

In 2024, a study conducted by Endometriosis UK found that the average diagnosis time for endometriosis in the UK is 8 years and 10 months despite it impacting 1 in 10 people who are assigned female at birth.<sup>3</sup> The International Association for Premenstrual Disorders report that it takes an average of 6 medical providers across 12 years for someone to get a diagnosis of Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD), with 90% of those who have PMDD living with a misdiagnosis.<sup>4</sup>

There is opportunity here for more awareness to be made and more resources to be shared around what regular or irregular menstruation looks like and where students studying in Exeter can go for support for menstrual health conditions.

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“I have missed classes over how much pain I have and being physically sick (vomiting) from the pain. I have missed classes and study sessions out of the house because of fear of leaking through because of how heavy it is. PMDD affects so many women, including myself and it can be days of depression symptoms. I have spent countless days crying, feeling as though I am not good enough because of PMDD and low mood around my period which means I am unable to study and lack academic motivation.”

“

“I believe that a lot of symptoms I experience aren't just from menstruation but could be heavily linked to PMDD (Pre-Menstrual Dysphoric Disorder) where typical PMS symptoms are a lot worse and greatly impact my mental health which prevents me from fully living my life including my social life, being unable to get out of bed to attend lectures, brain fog, and increased anxiety. When I am on my period I experience prolonged periods of physical pain (especially in my legs) where I cannot make it onto campus and since all of my modules are seminar based there are no recordings so I miss out on a lot of important in class discussions which would help me in the other work assigned for the modules.”

“

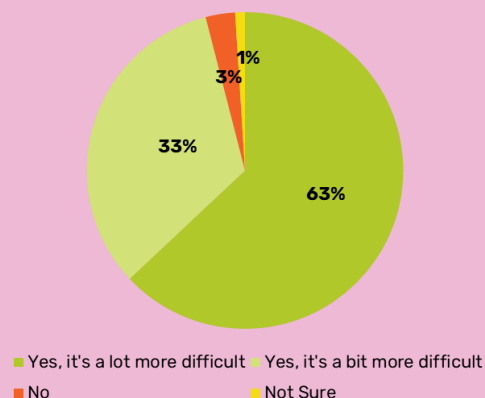
“I have suffered from bad pain in the past that makes it difficult to walk to lectures or social events. On my current pill I get extremely emotional, I cried for an entire day over my dissertation (it was a small setback) and my friends and supervisor all saw. I am currently awaiting surgery to find out if I have endometriosis and am worried it may fall in the exam period or on my graduation.”

“

“I suspect I have endometriosis - for my first 2 years of uni, I made do with over the counter pain killers meaning I was in agony for up to 11 days a month whilst menstruating, plus 1-2 days of ovulation pain. I've been forced to go on the contraceptive pill because I could not focus on my degree, especially final year, with the amount of pain I was in.”

## Impact on Classes

Do you find it more difficult to focus in class when you are menstruating?



96% of students reported that they find it more difficult to focus in class when they are menstruating, with 63% finding it a lot more difficult and 33% a bit more difficult.

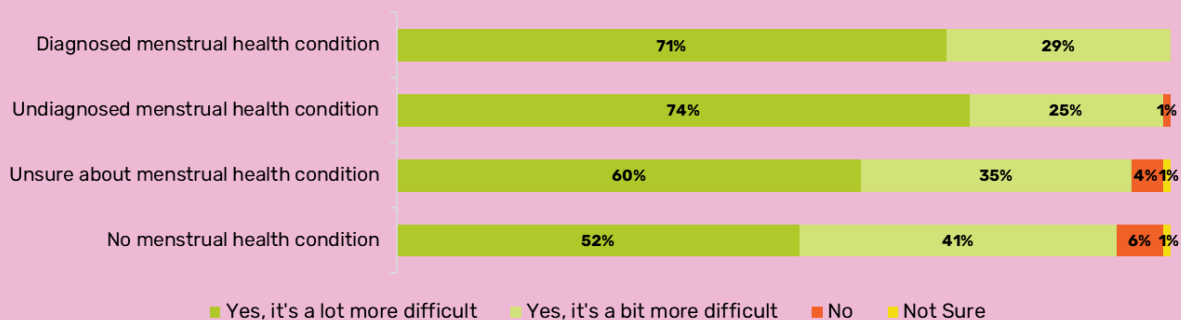
Only 3% of students reported that they do not find it more difficult with the final 1% being unsure.

This follows the findings from the HEPI report where only 12% of respondents said that their period did not impact their ability to study in class.<sup>5</sup>

This impact is noticeably higher for students with diagnosed or suspected menstrual health conditions, with 100% of students with a diagnosed menstrual health condition reporting that it is more difficult to focus in class and 99% of students who believe they have an undiagnosed menstrual health condition.

Do you find it more difficult to focus in class when you are menstruating?

Breakout: Menstrual Health Condition

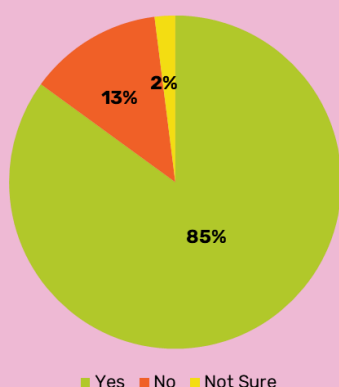


“Severe menstrual cramps, anxiety, fatigue, and mood swings can make it very difficult to concentrate in class. The physical discomfort and feeling of being overwhelmed can affect attendance and make it harder to keep up with coursework, especially when assessment deadlines fall during that time.”



“I get very low moods, which, coupled with very heavy flow and sometimes bad cramps, can completely throw my motivation to do anything out of the window, and it makes it hard to keep a steady schedule because of this. Sometimes I would fall into bad habits like bedrotting even after my period has finished, though other times I can manage it fine, every period is different”

Have you ever missed class because of menstruation?



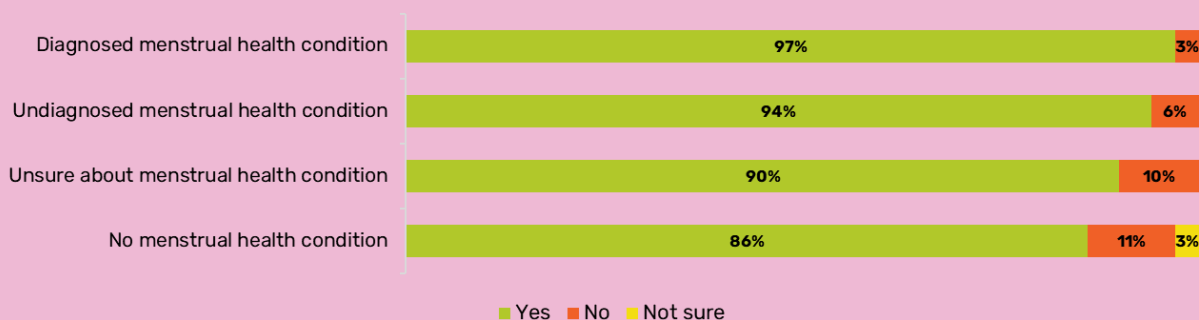
85% of students reported missing classes because of menstruation. Only 13% of students reported never missing class because of menstruation.

This, again, follows the findings from the HEPI report where only 27% of respondents said that their menstrual cycle does not impact their ability to attend classes or lectures.<sup>6</sup>

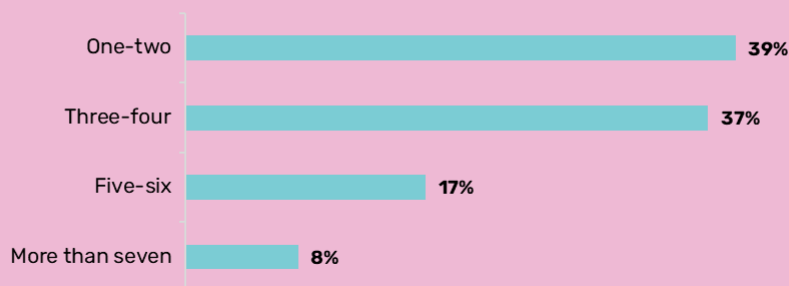
The impact is also, again, higher for students with a diagnosed menstrual health condition with 97% having missed a class due to menstruation. 94% of students with an undiagnosed menstrual health condition report having missed a class, as do 90% of students who are unsure.

Have you ever missed class because of menstruation?

Breakout: Menstrual Health Condition



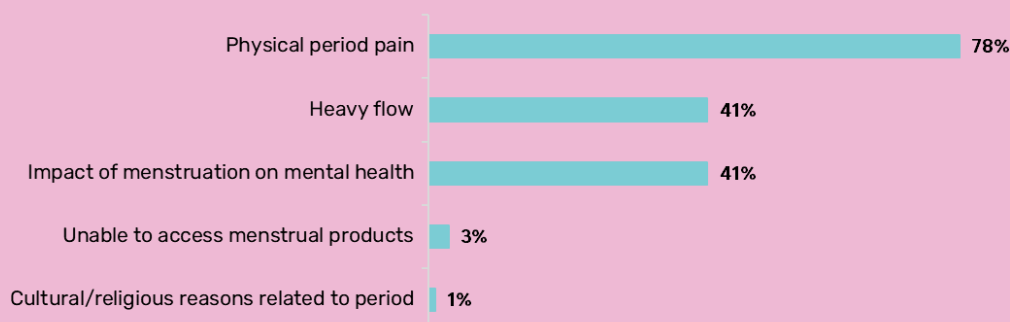
### How many classes do you think you missed in Term 1 because of menstruation and the symptoms you experienced?



39% of students reported missing one-two classes in the first term of the 25/26 academic year because of menstruation. 37% reported missing three-four classes, 17% reported missing 5-6 and 8% reported missing more than seven.

It is possible to estimate, then, that over the course of a year, 39% of students will miss three-six classes, 37% 9-12 classes, 17% 15-18 classes, and 8% more than 21 classes because of menstruation. This represents a significant proportion of taught learning with a high potential to be lost.

### Aspects of menstruation that have caused students to miss class



Looking at the aspects of menstruation that are preventing students from attending class, we see that 78% of students report the physical pain, 41% of students are prevented because of their heavy flow, and 41% cite the impact that menstruation has on their mental health. 3% of students have missed class due to being unable to access menstrual products and 1% have missed class because of cultural and/or religious reasons related to their period.



“It feels frustrating to have to do lectures from home or miss university or push back an assignment because of something I can’t control. My menstruation is heavily linked to stress so if uni is stressful I will probably have a period that leaves me bed bound for at least a day due to pain but then that stresses me out more because I’ve missed uni.”



“When menstruating, I find it extremely difficult to focus due to my intense pains. I often throw up or pass out, so I usually stay home for 1-2 days during each period as precaution. When writing essays, focusing becomes extremely difficult. I am constantly worrying if I have bled through my pad/tampon onto the seat below me during lectures.”



“It makes it much harder to perform well in exams and coursework as concentration drops due to extreme pain. Additionally just before my period, I have a lot of issues with concentration and motivation as my mental health and mood suffers. This means I essentially have two weeks in each month where I cannot perform to the best of my ability and can sometimes barely go to my lectures.”

50% of respondents to the HEPI survey also reported that they’d missed classes due to physical symptoms of premenstrual syndrome (PMS) – symptoms related to the cycle of menstruation that occur outside of a person being ‘on’ their period. 42% also reported experience mental health/mood symptoms of PMS causing them to miss classes.<sup>7</sup>

This experience was reflected in our text comments where students spoke about the impact of their menstrual cycle surrounding their period and that it often results in feelings of lower performance, or, in one student’s case, how their period resulted in a longer-term iron deficiency.



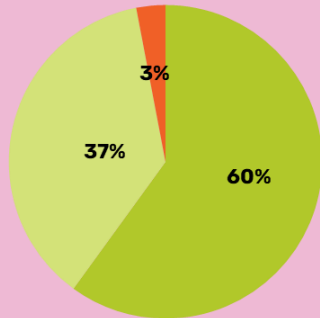
“I have really bad pain to the point I can’t move on the first two days of my period, let alone leave the house to go to classes. I also find it very difficult to do work in the week leading up to my period due to depressive symptoms. This means that for an average of 10-14 days of the month I am unable to perform well. Due to the nature of uni, when I am catching up on work I do not have the energy or time to talk to a doctor about my symptoms.”



“Due to heavy flow and increased pain for the first days of menstruation, I am unable to go to classes, I sometimes cancel plans and it also affects my mood. I feel stuck and stressed because I’m missing on work that over time could become unmanageable if I leave it for more than a week. If I do need to attempt an important meeting, such as those for my internship, I feel very self-aware of my period and scared the heavy flow could spot my clothes. I’ve had meetings with NHS practitioners and they suggested I became iron deficient due to heavy menstrual flow each month. It’s just a week of stopping my academic and social life because of how my period affects my life. I wish there is such thing as a menstrual leave at jobs and something similar in university.”

## Impact on Assignments

Do you find it more difficult to study, do research, or complete an assignment when you are menstruating?



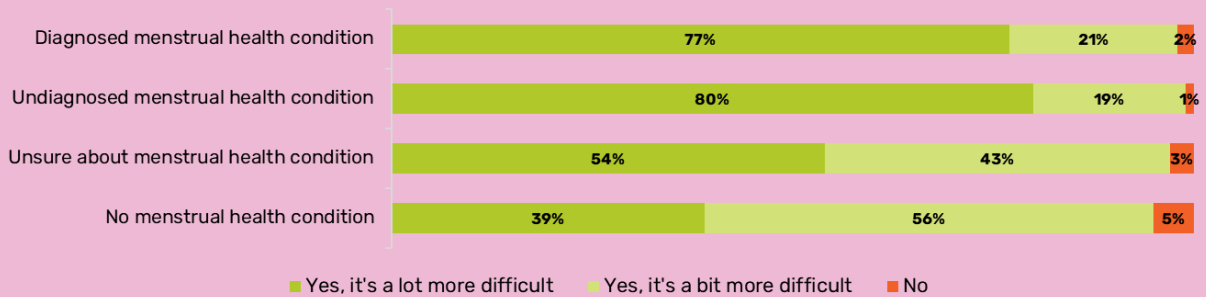
■ Yes, it's a lot more difficult ■ Yes, it's a bit more difficult ■ No

60% of students say that it is a lot more difficult to complete assignments when they are menstruating and 37% say it is a bit more difficult. Only 3% of students don't find it any more difficult to complete an assignment.

Of those students who have diagnosed menstrual health conditions, 77% find it a lot more difficult and 80% of students with undiagnosed conditions say it is a lot more difficult.

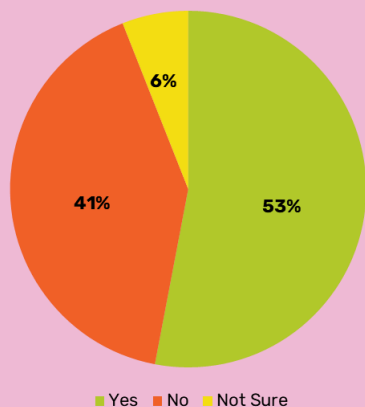
Do you find it more difficult to study, do research, or complete an assignment when you are menstruating?

Breakout: Menstrual Health Condition



■ Yes, it's a lot more difficult ■ Yes, it's a bit more difficult ■ No

Have you ever missed an assignment deadline because of menstruation?

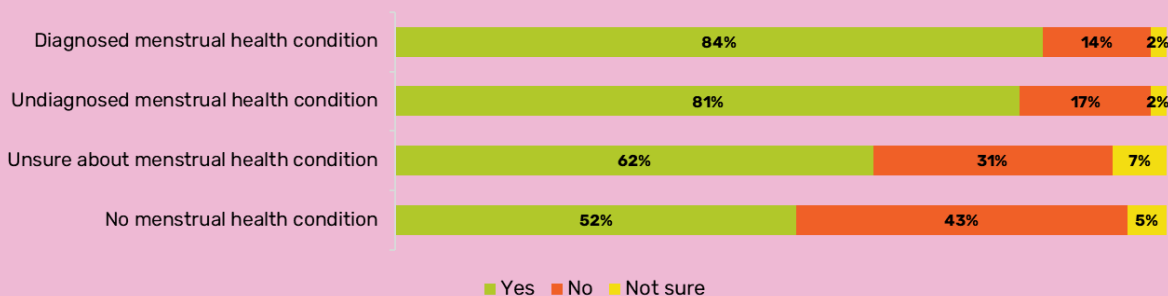


53% of students have missed assignment deadlines because of menstruation.

This rises to 84% of students with a diagnosed menstrual health condition, 81% of those with an undiagnosed condition, 62% of those who are unsure about having a menstrual health condition and 52% of students with no menstrual health condition.

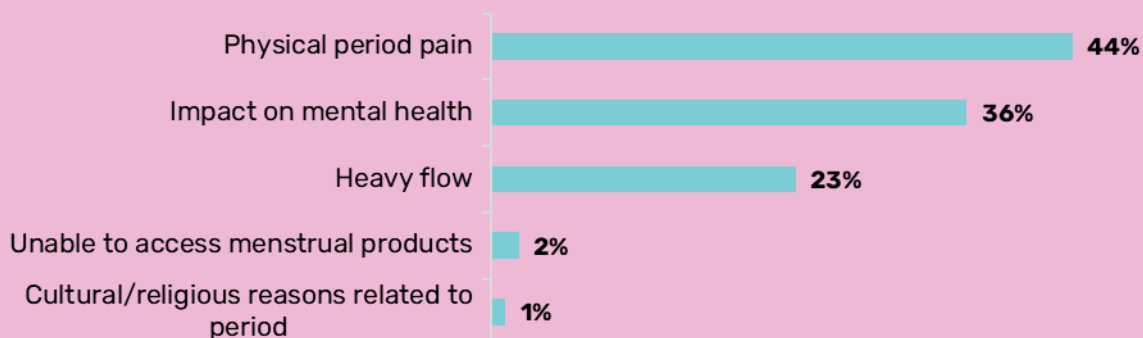
Have you ever missed an assignment deadline because of menstruation?

Breakout: Menstrual Health Condition



Looking at the aspects of menstruation that cause students to miss deadlines, we see that the top reason is physical period pain at 44%, 36% of students said it is the impact on their mental health that menstruation has, 23% reported heavy flow and 2% said it was because of access to menstrual products.

Aspects of menstruation that have caused students to miss an assignment deadline





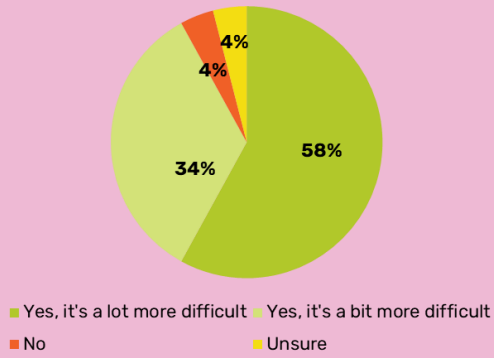
“My period affects my energy levels, especially on the first two days. So if I have something important due then, I’ll just have to power through, because that’s what’s expected of us. I’d also like to add, that I wish I knew that moving countries (I’m an international student) can affect your cycle. My first couple of periods here were quite intense, and coupled with the usual exhaustion I have...it was a tough time. I’m glad that the uni has menstrual products, which was helpful for me to try out the available brand to see if it works for me, since I didn’t know what the standard brand is.”



“I have severe physical symptoms which lead me to not be able to move much and be sick so I miss a few classes a term. It also means I have to push past this extreme nausea and illness to compete exams and assessments as there no other option which can lead to a lower quality of work and impact my grades.”

## Impact on Exams

Have you ever found it more difficult to focus or perform your best in an exam or assessment because of menstruation?

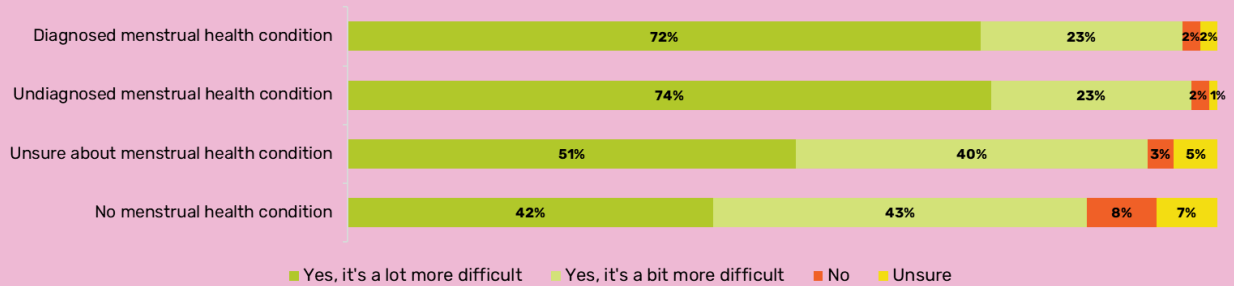


92% of students find it more difficult to focus or perform their best in an exam or assessment because of menstruation. Of these 92%, 58% of students reported finding it a lot more difficult.

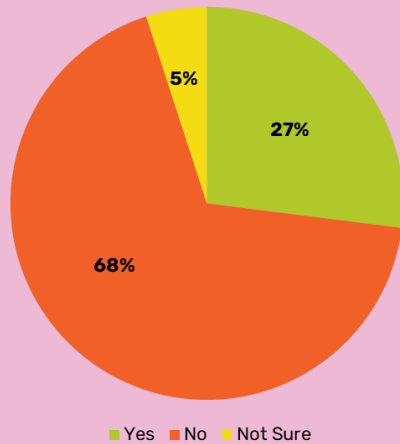
Of those students with diagnosed menstrual health conditions, 72% have found it a lot more difficult to focus or perform their best in an exam or assessment, as have 74% of students with an undiagnosed menstrual health condition.

Have you ever found it more difficult to focus or perform your best in an exam or assessment because of menstruation?

Breakout: Menstrual Health Condition



Have you ever missed an exam because of menstruation?

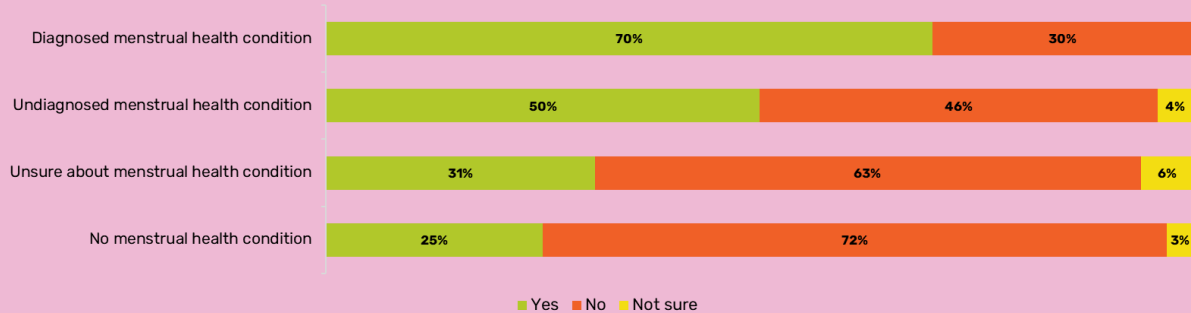


27% of students have missed an exam because of menstruation.

This rises to 70% of students with a diagnosed menstrual health condition, 50% of those with an undiagnosed condition, 31% of those who are unsure if they have a menstrual health condition, and 25% of students with no menstrual health condition.

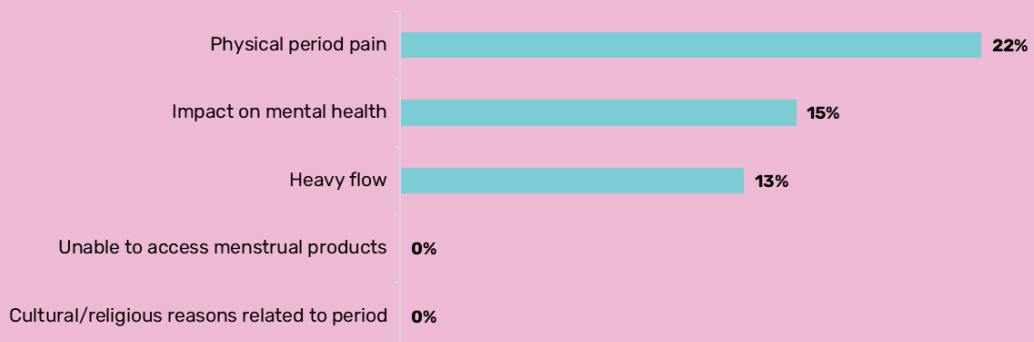
Have you ever missed an exam because of menstruation?

Breakout: Menstrual Health Condition



Looking at the aspects of menstruation that cause students to miss exams, we see that the top reason is physical period pain at 22%. 15% of students said it is the impact on their mental health that menstruation has, whilst 13% reported heavy flow.

Aspects of menstruation that have caused students to miss an exam



Text comments from students revealed that they feel missing an exam is more “non-negotiable” than assignment deadlines or classes due to a lack of mitigation. Students struggle with focusing due to physical pain and brain fog; they are unable to engage with pain-relief mechanisms so must “suffer” through. This negatively impacts their performance and leads to results that students don’t feel reflect their true ability.



“Suffering with endometriosis leaves me bedbound during the first few days of my period. The issue is that if I have a presentation, exam, deadline, etc, I have to choose between skipping it or suffering whilst I do it. More than once I’ve had to do an exam in immense pain - and I felt like I didn’t have a choice. I felt like it wasn’t a good enough reason to miss an exam. Furthermore, I felt like logistically I couldn’t miss an exam, I have no idea if there is a rescheduling process or anything. I miss classes regularly during the heaviest days of my period, and even working from home (readings, essays, etc) are impossible when I’m in pain.”



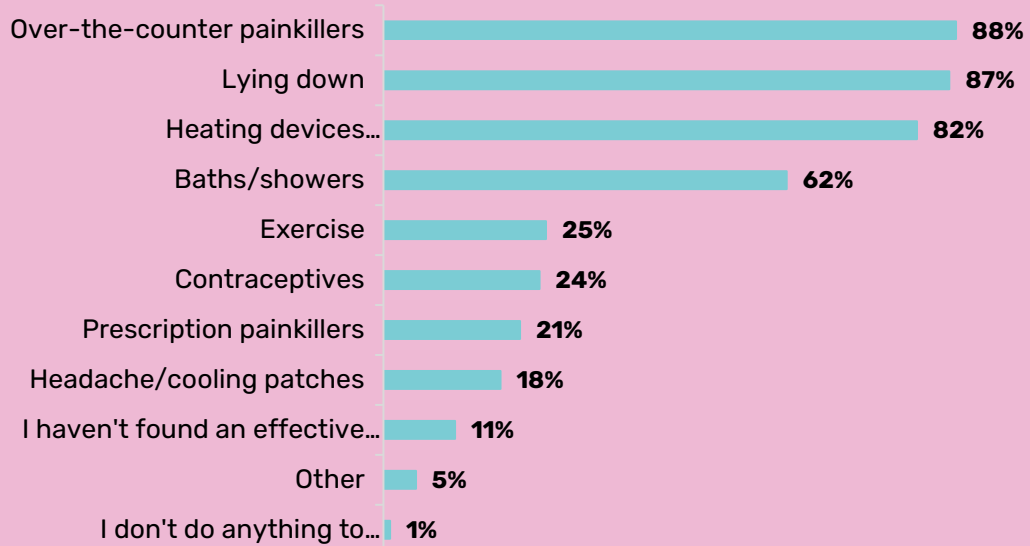
“If I have heavy flow and intense period pains, I struggle to make it out of bed and walk to campus. And if I do manage to attend my lectures / labs while in pain, I generally struggle to focus as I have to fully relax to help subside the pain. During exam season it can be particularly tough as exams are non-negotiables so I have to hope and pray that my paracetamol decides to work (and work during the exam time slot) to be able to focus and do my best on the exam.”



“My period has a major effect on my physical and mental health, so I often find I’m extremely tired, unable to move, and have trouble focusing. This is very impactful in exam seasons. I take care to catch up from lectures and push through with important things, but I was recently extremely negatively affected by my period during an online exam which I couldn’t avoid or get any help for. The pain meant I couldn’t concentrate and the extreme lethargy meant I couldn’t think to my normal extent. I was very disappointed by how the exam went and it’s such an awful feeling to be let down by something that is to an extent out of my control, yet natural.”

## Management of Symptoms

Do you use any of the following to help manage the symptoms you experience when you menstruate?



88% of students use over the counter painkillers to manage their symptoms. 87% lay down to manage their symptoms, it can be speculated how this management system could interfere with university. 82% of students utilise heating devices and 62% of students use baths and/or showers.

25% of students use exercise to manage their symptoms, 24% use contraceptives, and 21% of students use prescription painkillers.

Notably, 11% of students report having not found any effective way to manage their symptoms.

By comparison, 77% of respondents to the HEPI report said that they use painkillers, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen, to manage their menstrual cycle, with another 34% saying they use contraceptives for this same reason.<sup>8</sup>

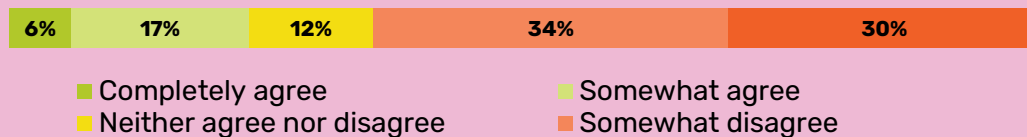


“I personally have PCOS and Endometriosis, which makes my periods really irregular and painful. I barely know when I’m getting them. I used to have medication back in my country but I have finished it and it’s really hard to get an appointment with a doctor here. So I’ve been about 2 months unmedicated. This has made my mood swings a lot worse to the point I’ve spent weeks I was unable to move from home which meant I missed many classes. The thing is it’s not only during my period, cause yeh my period is bad, heavy flows and it can last up to 21 days, but the rest of the time also affects me. I wish there was an easier way for international students to get appointments easily upon arrival. Specially having in mind how much we pay for tuition and visas.”



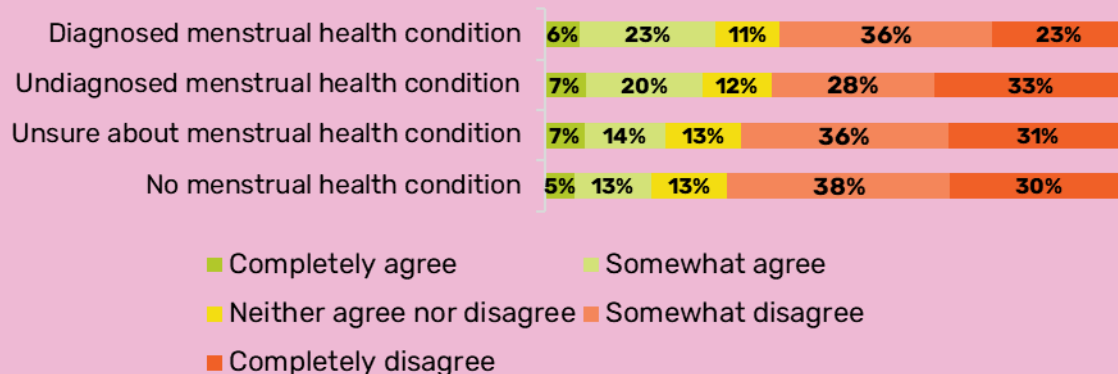
Only 23% of students agree that they feel comfortable talking to university staff about the impact that menstruation has on their studies. 64% of students disagreed that they felt comfortable.

I feel comfortable talking to university staff if menstruation is impacting my studies



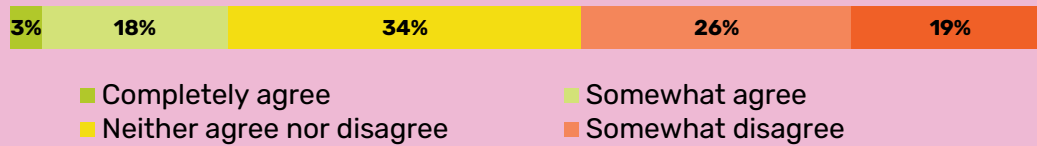
Students who have diagnosed menstrual health conditions are marginally more comfortable talking to staff about the impact that menstruation has on their studies at 29%. However, agreement in students with no menstrual health condition is marginally lower, at 18%. This suggests that students who do not have diagnosed conditions may feel less comfortable talking to staff, possible due to a lack of medical evidence supporting their experiences.

I feel comfortable talking to university staff if menstruation is impacting my studies Breakout: Menstrual Health Condition



Only 21% of Exeter students report feeling that the University supports them with their menstrual health.

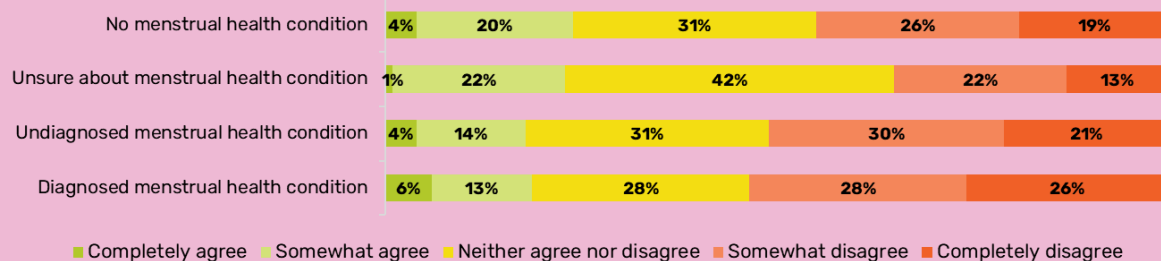
I feel the university supports me with my menstrual health



Generally, this is similar across menstrual health conditions, with the lowest agreement amongst students with diagnosed conditions, 19% overall agreement compared to the 21% average. This is inverse to the previous statement, suggesting that, while students with diagnosed conditions are slightly more comfortable talking about menstrual health with staff, they do not receive adequate support; similarly, that students without a condition are not comfortable talking to staff but do find that the support already put in place (such as free menstrual products) help more.

I feel the university supports me with my menstrual health

Breakout: Menstrual Health Condition



In the HEPI report, only 21% of respondents said they were comfortable approaching their institution for support with 56% reporting themselves to be uncomfortable. Text comments indicated that there was an inconsistency with how academics approached helping students account for the impact menstruation had on their studies, with some saying they don't get taken seriously when raising the issues menstruation causes them and others reporting better levels of understanding from staff.<sup>9</sup>

Exeter students reported similar feelings, with some students saying it feels taboo to speak directly to academics about menstruation or that it wouldn't be taken seriously as a reason for being unable to attend a class.

“

“Menstruation affects my ability to focus, pain and symptoms of it can often affect my ability to attend lectures/seminars and I feel it’s completely taboo to give it as a reason for missing things because tutors don’t take it seriously.”

“

“I have had a long history of extremely heavy and painful periods. Sometimes so bad that I can’t sleep or eat and I vomit for no reason. Nothing really helps, I basically just have to ride it out. I’ve had to skip lectures or tutorials because I haven’t slept well enough or I physically can’t pull myself away from lying on the floor/bed/by the toilet. I’ve never felt like lecturers or the university would consider it a valid reason to miss lectures, so I’ve always lied in emails to lecturers saying I have the flu/food poisoning/fever.”

“

“I don’t think I would be taken seriously if I discussed missing a deadline or seminar with a professor due to my period. I have suspected endometriosis so a lot of the time I can’t even get out of bed due to the pain.”

Some students also spoke about the availability of the menstrual products available in the bathrooms on campus, with some mentioning that they are often running low or not available in certain bathrooms, and others speaking about the lack of products suitable for those with heavy flows.

“

“Sometimes I struggle walking to Campus because of pain. In class I’m anxious about needing to change my tampons etc because I bleed heavily. Campus doesn’t have many heavy flow tampons available which leads to me bleeding through my clothes. Sometimes I’ve had to use toilet paper to somewhat stop the bleeding before I can go home.”

“

“It impacts my mood and thus my motivation, concentration and focus on my readings, assignments and classes. Some buildings don’t have period products in the toilets as well. Usually Xfi building.”

## Conclusion

The findings of this report make clear that menstruation has a significant and wide-ranging impact on the academic lives of students at the University of Exeter. Almost all students find it harder to focus in class, most having missed a class, over half an assignment deadline, and almost one-third an exam.

These findings mirror and in some areas exceed those of the national HEPI report, reinforcing that Exeter is not immune to a systemic challenge facing higher education. Crucially, the data shows that students with diagnosed or suspected menstrual health conditions are disproportionately affected, and yet many remain undiagnosed. This reflects broader healthcare issues in which conditions such as endometriosis and PMDD can take years of advocacy to identify.

Perhaps most concerning is the culture of silence that surrounds this issue. Only 23% of students feel comfortable speaking to university staff about the impact of menstruation on their studies, and only 21% feel that the University currently supports them with their menstrual health. Students report feeling that menstruation is not taken seriously as a reason for absence or difficulty, leading them to either fabricate alternative explanations or suffer in silence.

The evidence presented in this report demonstrates a clear need for institutional action. Students are losing significant amounts of academic time, not through a lack of effort or commitment, but because of a biological process that remains poorly accommodated in higher education policy and culture. Addressing this will require both structural change, such as the development of a dedicated menstruation policy, and a shift in the wider institutional culture towards openness and understanding.

## Recommendations

### Reasonable adjustments:

- Explicitly recognise menstrual crises as a mitigating circumstance within assessment policy. This could include acknowledgement of dysmenorrhea as a reason for evidenced or un-evidenced mitigation.
- Improve exam-day support, including access to menstrual products and care packs.

### Menstruation toolkit & support:

- Integrate a menstruation toolkit to give students easy access to menstrual health, external signposting, and supporting themselves, ideally to be published through the Wellbeing webpage.
- Supporting toolkit resources regarding menstrual disorders, how to get diagnosed, how the University can support them achieving diagnosis, and how to go through the ILP process.

### Structural normalisation:

- Engage with students on menstruation impact during existing campaigns (e.g exam de-stress, Welcome Week)
- Awareness of Success for All as a method for funding diagnosis of disorders.
- Increased access to period products across campus.

### Pastoral mentor training:

- Training for academic staff to normalise discussion of menstruation symptoms, awareness of potential disabling symptoms

## External Resources

If you are interested in reading more around this topic, you could start with the resources below:

- [The Hidden Impact of Menstruation in Higher Education](#), HEPI
- [Menstruation Matters for Students in Higher Education](#), Liverpool John Moores University
- [‘I was bed bound’: How extreme menstrual conditions affect students’ university experiences](#), The Tab
- [Universities need to do more on menstrual health](#), WONKHE
- [Years of being “dismissed, ignored and belittled”: Endometriosis UK urges improvement to deteriorating diagnosis times](#), Endometriosis UK
- [Facts and Figures](#), International Association of Premenstrual Disorders
- [Premenstrual dysphoric disorder \(PMDD\)](#), Fair Treatment for the Women in Wales,
- [Painful periods and disorders](#), if you would like further information on painful periods, potential disorders, symptom tracking and how to find support

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Stephenson, R. "The hidden impact of menstruation in higher education", HEPI report 191, *Higher Education Policy Institute*, July 2025, [Hepi-Report-191\\_The-Hidden-impact-of-menstruation-in-higher-education.pdf](#)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Endometriosis UK, ""Dismissed, ignored and belittled" The long road to endometriosis diagnosis in the UK", *Endometriosis UK*, March 2024, [Endometriosis UK diagnosis survey 2023 report March.pdf](#)

<sup>4</sup> IAMPD, "Facts & Figures", 2013-2026, [Facts & Figures – International Association for Premenstrual Disorders](#)

<sup>5</sup> Stephenson, R. "The hidden impact of menstruation in higher education", HEPI report 191, *Higher Education Policy Institute*, July 2025, pg. 39, [Hepi-Report-191\\_The-Hidden-impact-of-menstruation-in-higher-education.pdf](#)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. pgs. 37-38

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. pg. 37

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. pg. 41

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. pg. 49