

Menstrual Hygiene Management

**Education
about
menstruation
changes
everything.**

WHAT IS PUBERTY?

Puberty is the process that boys or girls undergo to become adults and sexually mature; in essence, the period from childhood to adulthood. Puberty involves a series of physical changes in both boys and girls that lead to the development of secondary sex characteristics, the physical features associated with adult males and females (such as the growth of pubic hair). While puberty involves a series of biological or physical transformations, the process can also have an effect on the psychosocial and emotional development of adolescents. Adolescents also increase their intellectual capacities and experience moral development during puberty. Social identity is supplemented by the search for a psychological identity. An important dimension of puberty is that young adolescents are able to integrate bodily changes into their self-identity, and to incorporate others' responses to these changes into that self-identity. During the early stages of puberty friendships between same-sex peers become more important due to the shared social, physiological changes including a possible detached relationship with parents. The physical growth experienced during puberty is accompanied by new and complex emotions including sexual desire and gender identity. These changes, combined with peer pressure, may cause adolescents to behave in a certain way. These changes may effect learning both positively and negatively. Positive changes include the ability to reason and understand complex processes and concepts. On the other hand, the negative effects associated with peer pressure, bullying and arrogance can be experienced by some boys and girls. Adolescents react differently to puberty education. Sometimes boys' behavior enables them to assert their stereotypical masculinity and therefore their power and supposed superiority. In some cultures in Zambia, girls who reach puberty are tutored to present themselves in public—as women or young ladies. There are stereotypes of what behaviors are acceptable for young men and women.

WHEN DOES PUBERTY OCCUR?

Puberty begins when extra amounts of chemicals called “hormones” are produced and lead to physical, emotional, and cognitive changes in the body. A growing adolescent may feel happy one moment, or sad, or confused the next moment. The onset of puberty varies among individuals. Puberty usually occurs in girls between the ages of 8 and 16, while in boys it generally occurs later, between the ages of 12 and 16. Most girls and boys begin to notice changes in their bodies between the ages of 10 and 14 which take place over a number of years.

See Table 1 below:

Table 1: What are the changes that take place in girls at puberty?

Changes in Girls

- Breasts look like they're developing a bit •
- Breasts start to develop •
- Girls gain weight, particularly on the hips •
- Menstruation starts •
- Bodies become curvier and hip bones widen •
- Hair grows in pubic area and armpits •
- Muscles get bigger and stronger, but they do not show up as much as boys' muscles

WHAT IS MENSTRUATION?

Menstruation is the monthly flow of blood from the uterus through the vagina in girls and women from puberty to menopause.¹ It is a normal process for women and girls, and it starts at puberty or adolescence. Girls tend to start their menstrual periods between the ages of 10 and 14, and this continues until they reach menopause usually between their late forties to mid-fifties. Menstruation is also sometimes known as menses or a menstrual period. During adolescence, a girl's body starts to change. Along with physical changes (such as growing breasts, wider hips, and body hair) the girl will also experience emotional changes due to hormones. The cycle for menses is usually around 28 days but can vary from 21 to 35 days. Each cycle involves the release of an egg (ovulation), which moves into the uterus through the fallopian tubes. The body's tissues and blood start to line the walls of the girl's uterus for fertilization. If the egg is not fertilized, the lining of a girl's or woman's uterus is shed through the vagina along with blood. The bleeding usually lasts between two to seven days each month, with some lighter flow and some heavier flow days. The menstrual cycle for girls during their first year or two is often irregular.²

MENSTRUAL HYGIENE MANAGEMENT

Menstruation has critical implications for girl's educational outcomes. Menstrual hygiene materials must be made available; linkages to health services must be formed; and safe latrines with water and soap, adequate sanitation and disposal mechanisms must be provided. These objectives benefit all members of the school community, including learners and staff. Furthermore, failure to meet them puts girls at risk of not having a high-quality educational experience. MHM in school includes the facilities, products, education, training, and support necessary for girls to manage their menstrual periods away from home. MHM is gaining recognition globally as a critical human rights and development problem, one that influences poverty levels and even a country's GDP. Around the world, stigmas and taboos have defined how menstruation is viewed and experienced. Now, a movement is growing, bringing the topic into the open and addressing menstruation as a normal part of being female.

Let's take a closer look: **What is menstruation?**

Menstruation is:

- A natural biological function of all females worldwide
- A natural process where the female body sheds the lining of the uterus every month if a fertilized egg does not plant itself there and grow into a baby
- When the lining of the uterus, rich in blood and other matter ready to nourish a baby, flows out through the vagina every 28 days if conception has not occurred
- Sometimes painful because the uterus cramps up to shed the lining

Menstruation is NOT:

- An illness or a curse
- Shameful
- A reason to keep girls and women from school, household activities, or work

What is MHM (Menstrual Hygiene Management) in school?

MHM in school is a program that provides:

- Proper girl-friendly facilities: separate toilets for boys and girls
- Washrooms for girls with water and soap available
- Access to sanitary pads or towels, or other products for discretely absorbing the menstrual flow
- Means for disposal of used menstrual absorption products
Training in MHM for teachers, especially SHN coordinators and guidance staff
- Education about menstruation for girls and boys, Parents' and Teachers' Associations (PTAs), and other parent/community structures
- Booklets and other support materials for pupils and teachers
- WASH Clubs with MHM activities

Why is MHM important?.

- Lack of MHM is a big reason why girls stay home from school. They can lose up to five days per month, then they lose track of their school work and eventually drop out.
- Having access to MHM increases a girl's confidence, sense of value, and self-worth.
- MHM is a main strategy for keeping girls in school and increasing the numbers of educated girls and women in our country
- An educated woman contributes significantly to her family's health and to the development of her country

What are the challenges that girls face managing menstruation at school?

Menstruating girls frequently experience:

- Fear of standing up to answer questions, in the classroom, in case they have stained their skirt
- Bullying and teasing from boys
- Shame and fear of people finding out that they are “on their menses”
- Lack of accurate information and fear about what is happening to them
- Health problems related to inability to change their pads regularly i.e. urinary tract infection, vaginal candida, etc.
- Taboos on what they can and cannot do, where they can and cannot be, during their menses
- Lack of support and understanding from the adults in their lives: families, and teachers

What are small doable actions for MHM?

While waiting for permanent structures or programs, a school can:

- Engage local stakeholders (local counselors, traditional leaders, civic leaders) in a discussion forum on MHM issues
- Create girl-friendly corners or clubs
- Create sanitary pads out of local materials
- Come up with appropriate and sustainable ways to support MHM in schools
- Carry out awareness education for parents and the community at large
- Create linkages with service providers for support (health practitioners, local business leaders)
- Engage local radio stations to broadcast appealing MHM messages

MHM SCHOOL CHECKLIST

A good MHM in-school program should have the following elements.

- Informational program for school, PTA
- community MHM-themed community events (theater, radio)
- Washrooms for girls
- Water and soap in girls' washrooms Disposal place for used pads Emergency pads in a place where girls know to find them
- Comfort kits (bag with pads, panties, soap, booklet on puberty)
- A local pad production program Guidance teacher or counselor designated for MHM School Health Nutrition (SHN) coordinator trained in MHM
- MHM training for all teachers
- WASH Club with MHM activities Talks on MHM from local nurses or environmental health technicians
- Approved medications for menstrual pain with guidance or SHN teacher Mentoring by older girls for younger girls
- Booklets on puberty for boys and girls Guidance materials for teachers
- Visual aids on menstruation and puberty Inclusion of menstruation and puberty in classroom subject teaching
- School funds raised and set aside for MHM support (for example, pad purchase)
- MHM Toolkit 9 Income-generating activities related to MH

ACTIVITIES, GAMES, AND FUN

ROLE-PLAY

(Suggested Time: 50–60 minutes not including preparation time)

Session Objectives

- Describe the basic bodily function of menstruation
- Through a role-play and discussion, list challenges girls face in managing their monthly menses (periods) in school 3.
Identify small doable actions to address these challenges
 - ◊Preparations/Materials Needed
- Volunteer actors (7)
- Chitenge cloth

PLEASE NOTE: ADVANCE PREPARATION REQUIRED.

This session involves a role-play/drama on a sensitive topic. The script follows the training session guide. The play requires three males and two females to play the role of pupils, plus one additional participant (male or female) to play the role of teacher. The actors must be comfortable role-playing on the topic of menstruation. They should receive the script in advance and be asked to rehearse at least once as a group in preparation.

TRAINER'S NOTE: This topic might be quite difficult, even embarrassing, to discuss. For this reason, we provide detailed notes to help. We encourage you to prepare and be confident. In the end, participants most often react very well and express relief and gratitude to have the opportunity to address a topic that is rarely talked about but that people understand is very important.

Introduction and Overview to MHM (5 min)

Say: This training session covers an important hygiene practice that is often overlooked, menstrual hygiene management—what females must and can do to manage their monthly periods in a safe, private, and healthy manner. This topic can make boys and girls, men, and women uncomfortable to talk about in the beginning, because it is a topic we don't often discuss in public. Between the ages of 10 and 14 most girls and boys begin to notice changes in their bodies and in their emotions. These physical and emotional changes take place over a number of years. It is a normal growing up process and it is all part of becoming ready for adulthood. Changes take place at different ages for different children. Girls start to develop the body of a woman, and that includes beginning to have a monthly menstrual period. Monthly bleeding is perfectly normal, not something to be scared of. It lasts four to seven days, and usually happens every month.

Even though it's normal, menstruation can present real challenges to girls in school. Let's watch a play that will highlight some of these challenges that girls face around managing menstruation in school.

A MENSTRUAL HYGIENE MANAGEMENT DRAMA (25 min)

A Role-Play in Three Acts Characters School Girl

1 add names School Girl
2 School Girl
3 School Girl 4 (absent)
..... no actor required School Girl 5 (absent)
..... no actor required Teacher
..... School Boy
1 School Boy
2 Setting Up

With the desks and chairs of the training room, set up a simulated classroom and put the rest of the chairs around the classroom scene so the participants can be spectators.

Scene 2 is in the school yard so make sure you can play both the classroom scene and the school yard scene without moving too much furniture around.

Scene 1: A Grade 7 Classroom Teacher calls pupils to class. Girl 3 has a stain on the back of her skirt. Teacher calls roll of all girls and boys. Two girls 4 and 5 are absent. She notices. Teacher is giving a lesson. She is explaining something and asks a question.

Boys 1 and 2 raise their hands quickly and want to be recognized. Teacher: "Not always the same boys! Let's hear from some girls. Stand up, Girl 3, and tell us what you know!" Girl 3 stands up and the boys see the stain on her skirt and start mocking and teasing her. Girl 3 is completely embarrassed and ashamed. She closes her books, sits down, and refuses to participate anymore. Teacher understands what happened and calls a break. Teacher helps Girl 3

to leave last and hands her a chitenge wrapper or large shawl to wear.

Scene 2: Girls in the School Yard

- Girl 1 and 2 are waiting for Girl 3 to come out of the classroom. The girls talk about the embarrassing moment Girl 3 just faced. Then they each share their own experience. Examples: Girl 1: “During my last menses, I had such pain I couldn’t come to school, so I stayed home for 2 days.” Girl 2: “I hate the toilet facilities here. There is no privacy. How am I supposed to clean up and change my pad? It stinks in there, and those boys tried to follow me and laughed and mocked me.” The girls talk about their absent classmates. One girl passed by the house of an absent one in the morning and tells what her problem was: She had cramps, she wouldn’t walk to school for fear of soaking her pad that is made from strips of old chitenge cloth.

One girl said she heard an awful story of a pupil in their village who got her menses for the first time and used the same pad for 7 days and came to school. She got an infection that destroyed her reproductive system. Girl 3: “Today was the last straw. I am leaving now to go home. I can’t go back in that classroom.” Girl 3 leaves to go home. The girls go back in the classroom. Scene 3: Back in the Classroom Teacher decides to talk to the boys and girls about what happened to Girl 3 before recess. Teacher: “This girl had her menses (monthly period), do you know what that is? We learned about this in Growth and Development. Boys, how do you think Girl 3 felt about the teasing and about her skirt stain? Do you think it was her fault? Is she alone? No, every single girl experiences menstruation and it is completely normal.” The boys respond by saying that they feel bad about their behavior now that they understand. The girls also say things about how they viewed the earlier embarrassing episode, and tell why the other girls are absent today. The girls

complain to the teacher about the school's poor facilities and lack of support and information.

Teacher: "We clearly have a big problem. I know it's hard to talk about this with your families. Let's talk to the head teacher and see if we can come up with a plan."

After the Role-Play ... Decide what MHM Actions Are Doable and Feasible (20–30 min) Ask/Discuss:

What just happened?

What problems/challenges/issues did you notice related to menstrual hygiene management?

What makes it hard for a girl or female teacher to privately manage menstruation?

TRAINER'S NOTE:

Make sure to touch upon problems related to the following topics:

- Sanitation facilities
- Products
- Rules or school policy
- Ignorance
- Shaming and bullying Ask: Do you think this is an issue in our school? What are some actions—especially small doable actions—schools and/or parents can carry out to improve the situation? Refer to the list of topics and make sure problems related to each one are addressed through a small doable action.

- Write: Suggestions on the flipchart. Note: This is not a detailed planning exercise. Ask: Are there any questions before we wrap up? Wrap up session. Say: Thanks for being willing to dive into this important aspect of hygiene, and thanks to the actors! Let's use what we decided to make a plan for our school.

PATTERNS FOR MENSTRUAL PADS

Making Your Own Cloth Pads

How you lay out your pattern pieces depends on how much fabric you have and the shape and size of your pattern.

- Standard winged pads should fit together well (left). Patterns with a flared end will generally slot well into each other if you have to put some pieces upside down to make them fit (right).

How much fabric you will need will depend on how many pads you want to make from it, and also the pattern you are using. You can work that out by measuring the width and length of your patterns, and estimating how many you'll be able to cut out from your fabric. Always allow extra for shrinkage and the fact you'll probably lose some to fraying in the wash.

Fabrics & Styles

Suggested Fabrics 100% cotton fabrics, e.g., old towels, sheets, pajamas, t-shirts, cotton flannel, or hemp, anything you feel is comfortable, soft, and gentle next to your skin.