

AN OVERVIEW OF MENSTRUATION TO MENOPAUSE

A booklet for Sri Lankan Menstruators by Sarvodaya Women's Movement
As part of the Collective Action Against Period Poverty





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The launch of this handbook on Menstrual Health and Hygiene marks a significant milestone in our collective effort to promote awareness, education, and empowerment for all menstruators in Sri Lanka. Menstrual hygiene is not just a health issue—it is a fundamental aspect of dignity, gender equality, and overall well-being. This handbook serves as a vital resource for individuals, educators, health practitioners, and policymakers, equipping them with accurate information and practical guidance to break taboos, challenge stigmas, and foster a supportive environment for menstrual health management.

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I would like to express my gratitude to the entire staff of the Sarvodaya Women's Movement for their support and contributions. This initiative would not have been possible without the collective efforts and dedication of all those involved.

Menu De Silva

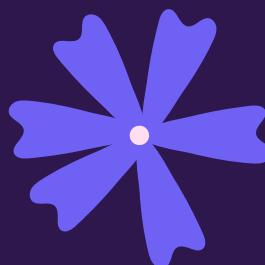
President

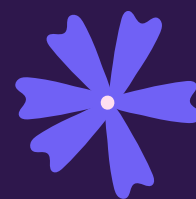
Sarvodaya Women's Movement

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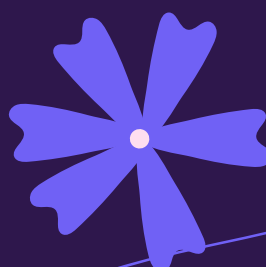
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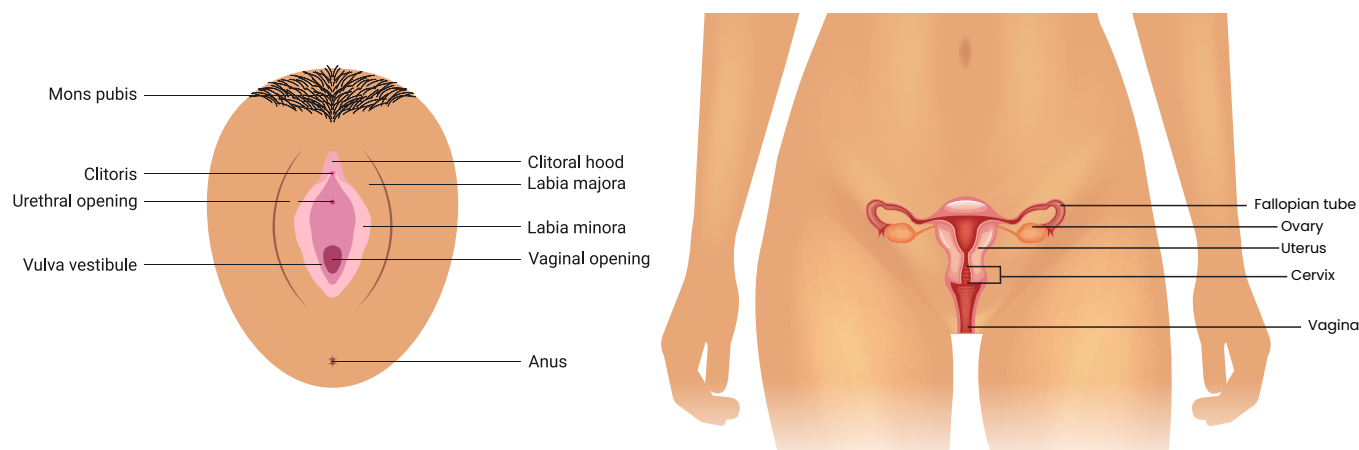
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01 INTRODUCTION TO THE FEMALE REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM

The female reproductive system has important structures both on the outside and inside of the body



What are the structures of the female reproductive system found outside the body?

On the outside of the body, the structures are referred to as the **external genitalia**.

The external genitalia consists of the **vulva** which has an outer fold (**the labia majora**), an inner smaller fold (**the labia minora**), the **vaginal opening**, an **urethral opening** and the **clitoris** (as shown in the picture). It is important to remember that the size, shape and colour of external genitalia is different between persons.

Hair growth is common over the skin covering the genitalia, including the labia majora.

Both the labia are present to protect the vaginal opening. The vaginal opening leads to the **vaginal canal**; a muscular tube. During sexual intercourse, the penis from the male enters the vagina through this opening, and babies are also delivered through the vaginal opening during childbirth.

The **hymen** is a thin membrane found around the vaginal opening. It is a structure that remains on after the reproductive system develops in a baby. The hymen can tear during sex or even during strenuous exercises/activity, and there may also be a small amount of bleeding. It is important to remember that not everybody bleeds once a hymen tears, some are born with a lax/stretchable hymen that can stretch without tearing, and some are even born without a hymen.

The clitoris is a small “pleasure organ” and it is sensitive to touch. It can be stimulated before or during sexual intercourse and this will lead to an orgasm (peak sexual arousal).

Urine from the bladder is released through the urethral opening, found between the clitoris and the vaginal opening.

What is the link between the hymen and virginity?

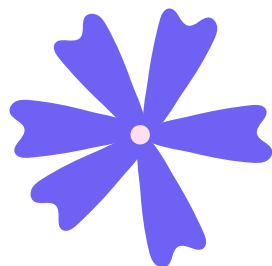
Virginity is a social construct. Certain societies believe that the presence of a hymen that is not torn signifies virginity (i.e. a person who has not previously had sexual intercourse). The presence or absence of a hymen is not a medical concern.

The hymen can tear during sex or even during strenuous exercises/activity, and there may also be a small amount of bleeding. It is important to remember that not everybody bleeds once a hymen tears, some are born with a lax/stretchable hymen that can stretch without tearing, and some are even born without a hymen.

What are the structures of the female reproductive system found on the inside of the body?

The vaginal opening leads into the vagina, a hollow muscular tube (as described above). The cervix is found at the entrance to the uterus (also called the womb). The cervix has a small hole to facilitate the entry of sperm (the male reproductive cell) into the uterus. The uterus is the location of the developing baby during pregnancy, and it has muscle layers which can expand to accommodate the growing baby. When there is no pregnancy, the lining of the uterus is shed approximately every month as a menstrual period.

The female reproductive system has two ovaries on either side of the uterus. The ovaries contain many female reproductive cells known as ova (egg) and also release hormones such as oestrogen and progesterone. Approximately every month, one egg is released from either of the ovaries and it travels down a tube known as the fallopian tube towards the uterus. Fertilisation of the egg by a sperm occurs in the fallopian tube and this fertilised egg then implants in the uterus. If no fertilisation occurs, this egg is then passed out of the body with the menstrual period (described further below).



02 INTRODUCTION TO ADOLESCENCE AND PUBERTY

Puberty is a period in early adolescent years where major physical and psychological changes occur as children become adults. This is initiated by hormone signals from the brain to the reproductive organs - either the ovaries (in a person assigned female at birth) or the testes (in a person assigned male at birth). The physical and psychological changes, known as sexual characteristics, are different in males and females.

Puberty in girls starts between the ages of 10 - 13 years and stops between the ages of 15-17 years, whereas in boys it starts between the ages of 12-14 years and stops around the age of 20 years.

What changes occur in those assigned male at birth?



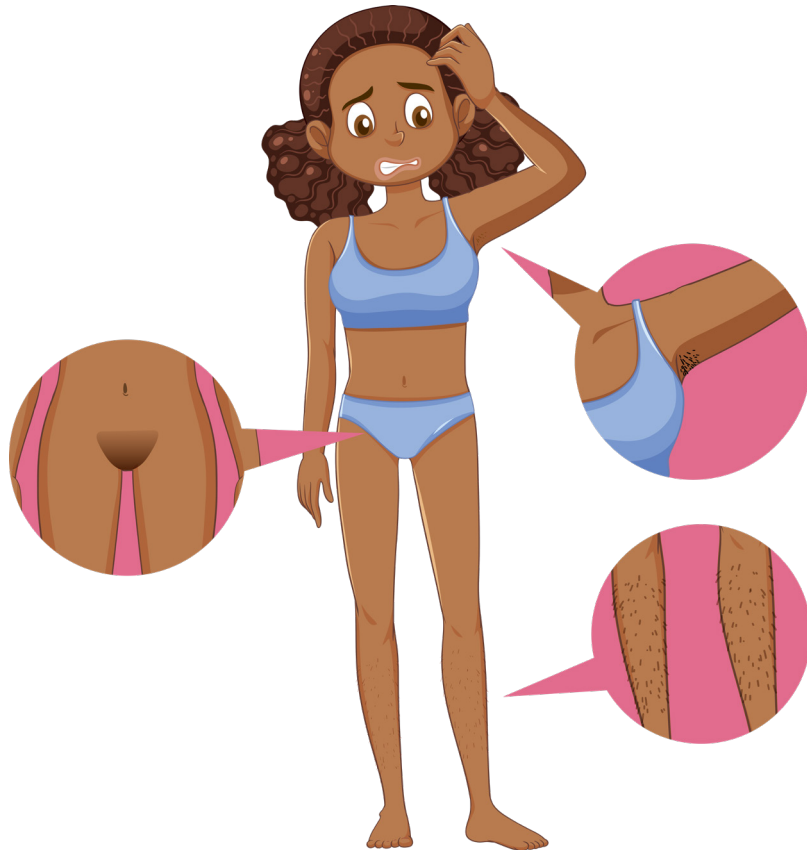
Physical

- » Weight increases
- » Skin becomes oilier
- » Acne can develop
- » Increase sweating
- » Shoulders gets broader
- » Hips become narrow
- » Muscles become stronger and bigger
- » Voice gets deeper
- » Penis becomes larger and wider
- » Testicles get larger
- » Facial hair develops
- » Underarm hair develops
- » Pubic hair develops
- » Body hair develops on back, arms and legs
- » Sperm production in the testes begins
- » Erection occur when nervous or excited
- » Wet dreams may occur (ejaculation during sleep)

Psychological

- » Easily sexually stimulated
- » Impulsive
- » Likes to experiment
- » Highly irritable
- » Easily influenced by peers

What changes occur in those assigned females at birth?



Physical

- » Body becomes curvier
- » Hips widen and weight increases on hips
- » Skin becomes oilier
- » Acne can develop
- » Increase sweating
- » Underarm hair develops
- » Pubic hair develops
- » Breasts start to develop
- » Leg muscles become bigger and stronger (not as much as in males)
- » Menstrual periods start
- » Whitish discharge occurs from the vagina close to or in between periods
- » Ovulation (release of the female egg) occurs approximately every month

Psychological

- » Sexual desires
- » Likes privacy and isolation
- » Likes to experiment
- » Irritability
- » Easily influenced by peers

03 INTRODUCTION TO THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE

What is menstruation?

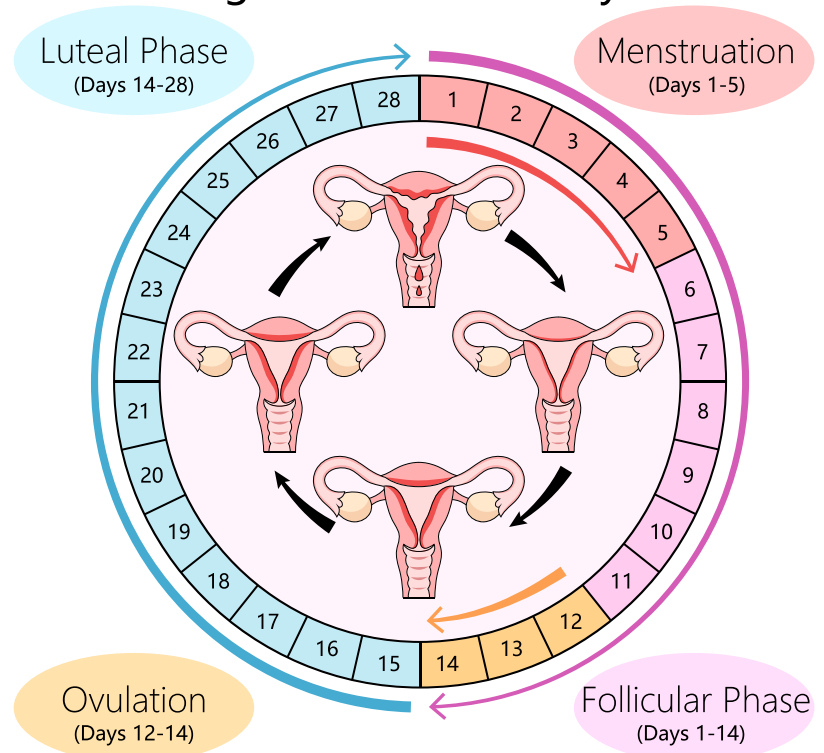
Approximately once a month, a girl will experience a monthly menstrual bleed. The very first menstrual bleed, also known as a menstrual period, is called menarche. This only happens when a girl's reproductive system has matured and is functioning well. The menstrual cycle is controlled by a series of hormones released from the brain and the ovary. The hormones, Follicle Stimulating Hormone (FSH) and Luteinizing hormone (LH) are released from the brain whilst the hormones Oestrogen and Progesterone are released from the ovary. These hormones primarily act on the brain and ovary.

During the first few months (sometimes even in the first few years), a girl's menstrual cycle may not be regular as it takes some time for the menstrual cycles to regularize and occur approximately every month. During those initial few months there also may be no ovulation (the process where the female reproductive cell which is also known as an egg/ovum is released from the ovary).

What does a menstrual cycle mean?

The menstrual cycle length is the time from the 1st day of bleeding in one month to the 1st day of bleeding the next month. The average (mean) cycle length is 28 days, but a cycle length between every 21 - 35 days is considered normal.

Stages of Menstrual Cycle



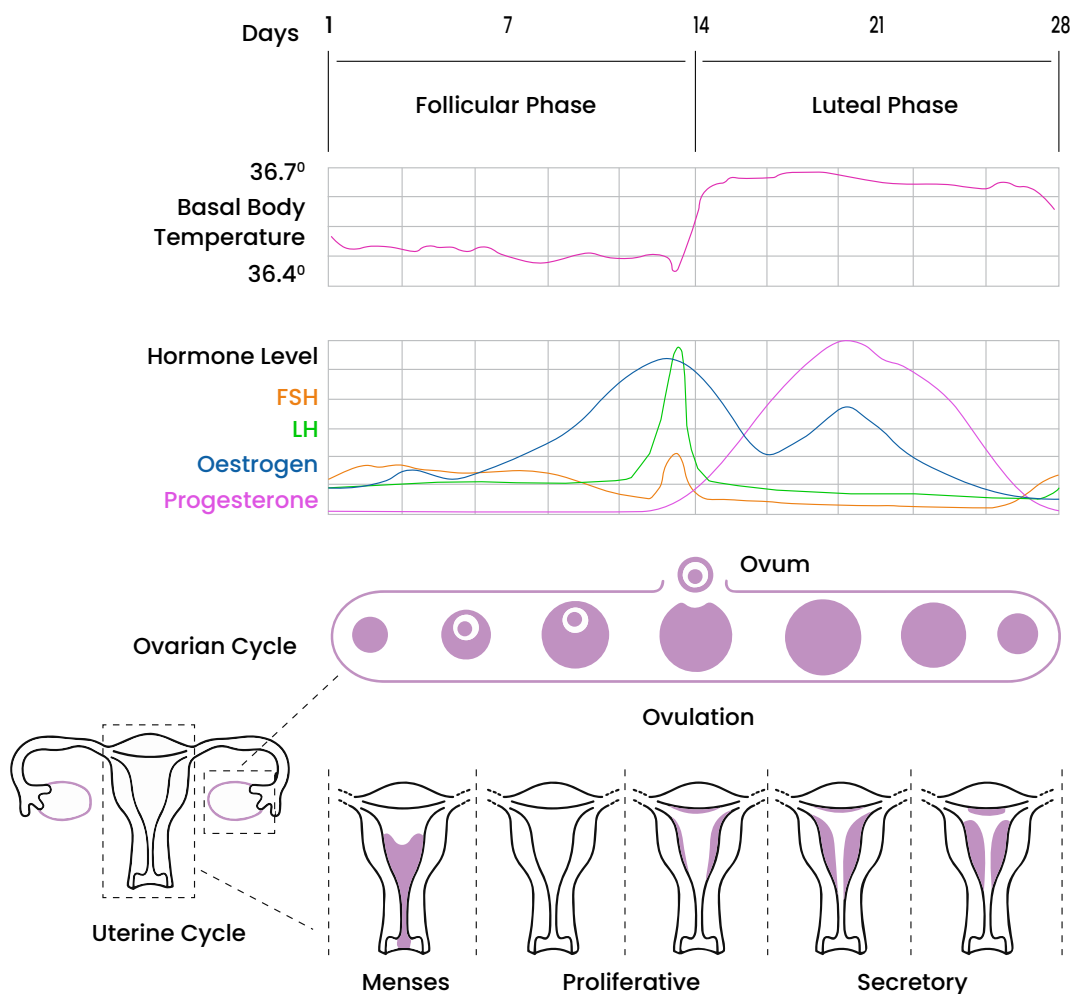
Why does menstruation occur?

The menstrual cycle is controlled by a series of hormones released from the brain and the ovary. The hormones, Follicle Stimulating Hormone (FSH) and Luteinizing hormone (LH) are released from the brain whilst the hormones oestrogen and progesterone are released from the ovary. These hormones primarily act on the brain and ovary.

Day 1 of the menstrual cycle is considered to be the 1st day of bleeding. After bleeding, the levels of oestrogen and progesterone are low, however the levels of these hormones slowly start increasing once the bleeding stops.

The hormone, oestrogen, acts on the lining of the uterus (known as the endometrium) to make the lining grow

thicker. At the same time, it stimulates one egg in the ovary to start maturing and approximately in the middle of the cycle (day 12 to day 14), the spike of the hormone LH, stimulates the mature egg to be released. This process is known as ovulation. The hormone progesterone is then secreted by the ovary to act on the endometrial lining to make it more “sponge-like” and ready for a possible implantation of a fertilised egg. Fertilisation is when a mature egg that was released joins with a sperm to form an embryo. If there is no fertilisation, the progesterone and oestrogen levels fall and the thickened tissue lining of the uterus is shed. In order to shed this lining, the uterus will contract, and cause menstrual pain. Blood, tissue and the unfertilized egg form the menstrual fluid that is sent out through the vagina. This process is called menstruation.



| What age does menstruation occur?

Menstruation usually commences between the ages of 11 and 12 years and is known as “menarche”.

| How long can you have menstrual bleeding for?

On average a menstrual bleed lasts between 3 to 5 days, but for some individuals it can last anywhere from 2 to 7 days. The amount of menstrual fluid lost during periods vary from person to person, but on average is about 80 ml over the duration of the bleed.

| What symptoms can you experience during your period?

Some individuals may experience abdominal pain, back pain, headaches, nausea and vomiting during their periods, but some menstruators may not experience any symptoms at all.

| Can I wash during my period?

It is important to stay clean during your menstrual period. Clean the genital area using running water and dry before wearing underwear. There is no harm in bathing during menses. Bathing is essential during menses for cleanliness.

| Can I swim during my period?

Yes, you can swim during your period. It is important to wear an appropriate menstrual product such as a tampon or menstrual cup whilst swimming.

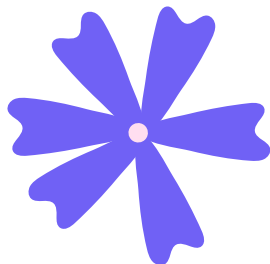
| Why is it important to track your period?

Tracking your period will enable you to estimate the date your period is due. It will also highlight fertile days and can highlight any menstrual problems. Many free phone applications are available to track your period.

Is period pain normal?




Period pain may occur as your uterus contracts to shed the lining (endometrium). However, the pain should not be so severe that it interferes with your daily activities. Simple painkillers (paracetamol or mefenamic acid if not allergic to these medications), a hot water bottle and gentle exercises can help alleviate period pain. Additionally, avoid caffeine, alcohol and smoking, salty and oily foods, which can worsen menstrual symptoms. If the pain does not resolve, it is important to consult a doctor.




04 MAINTAINING A MENSTRUAL CALENDAR

Why is it important to track your period?

Tracking your period will enable you to estimate the date your period is due. It will also highlight fertile days and can highlight any menstrual problems. Many free phone applications are available to track your period.



Health Promotion Bureau
செலிடிக் ஸ்டிரீட்டில் கார்ட்டைன்ஸ்
ககாதார மேம்பாட்டு பணியகம்



Period Tracker

Year

Name

Month	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31
January																															
February																															
March																															
April																															
May																															
June																															
July																															
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December																															

Cycle Length	
January	
February	
March	
April	
May	
June	
July	
August	
September	
October	
November	
December	

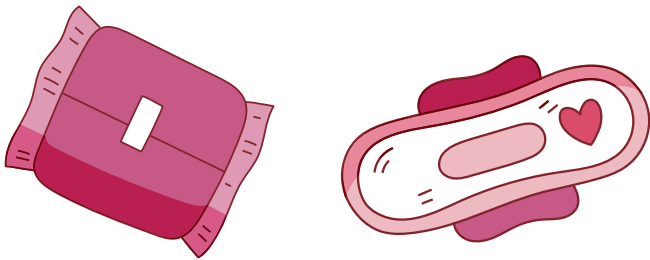
Flow			Abdominal Pain	Headache	Mood Swings	Acne
Light	Normal	Heavy				

Notes

05 MENSTRUAL HYGIENE

Which menstrual hygiene product should I use?

Many menstrual hygiene products are available and it is important to use a product that works well for you. Remember that before handling menstrual products and after disposal, hands should be washed with soap and water.



Menstrual pads are the commonest form of menstrual hygiene products available and can either be reusable (made of cloth) or disposable. They have an absorbable layer to absorb menstrual blood and may have wings or a sticky surface in order to be secured onto underwear. Menstrual pads with different absorbances are available (i.e. regular or heavy or light flow – panty liners). Menstrual pads must be changed at least every 4-6 hours, according to the flow of your period. Wearing it for longer periods can result in reproductive tract infections.

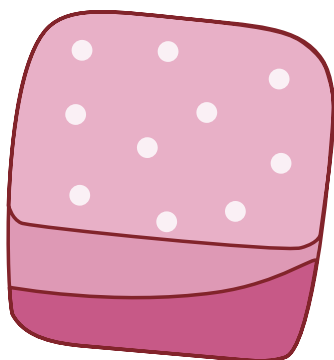
When disposing of the disposable pad, DO NOT flush it down the toilet, instead wrap it in the pad cover or tissue paper and dispose of it in a bin or burn it. If wastage is collected from the local authority (municipal council) in your area, ensure it is delivered to them on the specific date.

If using a reusable cloth menstrual pad, wash it thoroughly after use with soap and cold water, and air-dry it in the sun until completely dry. Keep the reusable menstrual pad in a covering in a clean dry place. The lifespan of a cloth pad will vary with the material used, however on average they can be used for about a year (or even more). If there is any disintegration of the material, the cloth pad should be discarded. Before disposing, it is necessary that the



cloth is washed and dried. The environmental damage is less as cloth is more biodegradable so it can be buried or burnt.

Disposable pads are readily available and easy to wear with different options, however they are not biodegradable and require the availability of underwear in order to be worn.



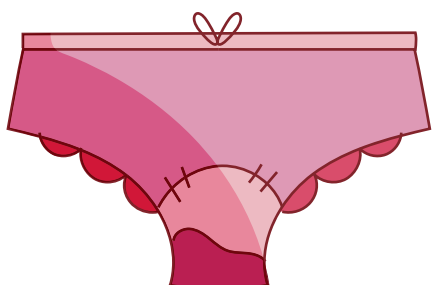
Cloth reusable pads can be re-used, so it is also cost-effective and can be prepared at home. They do also however, require the availability of underwear to be worn.

Cloth is still worn as a menstrual hygiene product. A new piece of cloth (made of Poplin, Mal piece, Voile or Flannel) or a piece of used fabric that has been washed and cleaned, can be converted into a cloth pad. It must be changed at least every 4-6 hours, according to the flow of your period. Wearing it for longer periods can result in reproductive tract infections.

When using cloth to collect menstrual blood, wash it thoroughly after use with soap and cold water, and air-dry it in the sun until completely dry. Keep the cloth in a covering in a clean dry place until next use.

The lifespan of a cloth will vary with the material used, however on average they can be used for about a year (or even more). If there is any disintegration of the material, the cloth should be discarded. Before disposing, it is necessary that the cloth is washed and dried.

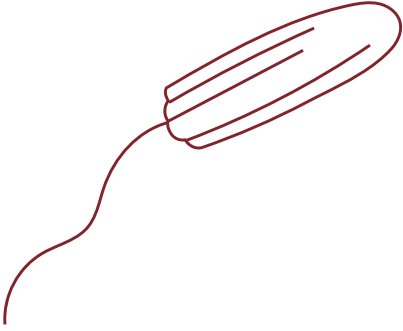
The environmental damage is less as cloth is more biodegradable so it can be buried or burnt. As it can be re-used it is also cost-effective and can be prepared at home. They do also however, require the availability of underwear to be worn.



Period underwear is similar to regular underwear, but with a thickened lining to absorb menstrual blood. Period underwear should be changed at least every 4-8 hours, depending on the brand recommendation and according to the flow of your period. Wearing it for longer periods than recommended by the brand, can result in reproductive tract infections. There is an initial high-cost, but as it can be re-used, it is cost-effective in the long term. It may need to be paired with other menstrual hygiene products like the menstrual pad or a tampon, if the menstrual flow is heavy.

When using period underwear to collect menstrual blood, wash it thoroughly after use with soap and cold water, and air-dry it in the sun until completely dry. Keep the cloth in a covering in a clean dry place until next use.

The lifespan of the underwear will vary with the material used, however on average they can be used for about a year (or even more). If there is any disintegration of the material, the underwear should be discarded. Before disposing, it is necessary that the underwear is washed and dried.



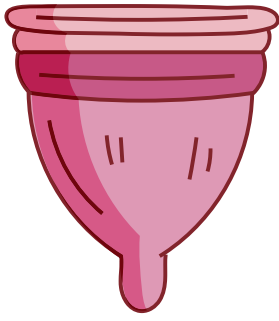
Tampons are menstrual products that are inserted into the vagina to absorb the menstrual blood. A string extends from the tampon outside the vagina for easy removal.

Tampons must be changed at least every 4-6 hours, according to the flow of your period. Wearing it for longer periods can result in reproductive tract infections, including toxic shock syndrome which is a rare life-threatening infection. Tampons with different absorbances are available (i.e. regular or heavy flow). As it is inserted into the vagina, users can swim and participate in outdoor activities comfortably whilst wearing it.

Tampons are more expensive than menstrual pads, not biodegradable and are not as easily available in Sri Lanka.

How to wear a tampon:

- » Wash your hands
- » Relax and sit on the commode or squat or put one leg on top of the commode to widen your pelvis
- » Find your vaginal opening
- » Remove the tampon plastic covering and hold the tampon correctly
- » Gently insert the rounded tip of the tampon into the vaginal opening
- » Use your index finger to push the lower part of the tampon into your vagina
- » If a plastic applicator is present, remove it and dispose of it in the bin
- » Check if there is any discomfort
- » Wash your hands after insertion
- » Change the tampon every 4-8 hours
- » To remove the tampon, wash your hands and gently pull on the string to remove the tampon.
- » Dispose the used tampon into a bin. Do not flush it down the toilet.

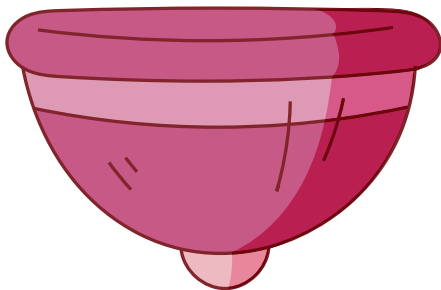


Menstrual cups are made of medical grade silicone and are available in different sizes. They have to be inserted into the vaginal canal to collect the menstrual blood. Menstrual cups can be worn for up to 10-12 hours. Wearing it for longer periods can result in reproductive tract infection.

How to wear a menstrual cup:

- » Before using a menstrual cup, it is important to choose the right follow the instructions received with the cup.
- » Boil the cup in water for a few minutes before use.
- » The cup should then be dried and stored in a cool dry place till a menstrual period.
- » Before using the cup, wash your hands
- » Relax and sit on the commode or squat or put one leg on top of the commode to widen your pelvis
- » Find your vaginal opening
- » Fold the cup to make insertion easier
- » Relax and gently insert the folded cup into the vagina. Once completely inserted, you will feel the cup “pop” open
- » After wearing it for 10-12 hours, wash your hands and gently pull down on the stem of the menstrual cup
- » Once removed, empty the cup into a commode, rinse the cup with water and reinsert.
- » After the period finishes, the cup should be washed, boiled, dried and then stored in a cool dry place.

Different positions (i.e squatting, one knee on the commode) and different folds of the cup can make insertion into the vagina easily. As it is inserted into the vagina, users can swim and participate in outdoor activities comfortably whilst wearing it. Menstrual cups can be used for up to 5-10 years making it an eco-friendly method. The initial purchase cost is high, but as it can be reused for a long period of time, it is cost-effective in the long run.



Menstrual discs are the latest menstrual hygiene product available. A small disc-like structure has to be inserted through the vagina (similar to a menstrual cup), but it sits just below the cervix (entrance to the womb/ uterus) to collect the menstrual blood.

Insertion is similar to a menstrual cup, the sides of the disc are squeezed together to narrow it for insertion, and it is inserted as far inside as possible.

It can be kept for 12 hours, but if the menstrual flow is heavy, it will have to be changed more often. As they are inserted high up, you can have sex whilst wearing the menstrual disc. Most menstrual discs are disposable and not reusable. As it is inserted into the vagina, users can swim and participate in outdoor activities comfortably whilst wearing it.

| What are the consequences of poor menstrual hygiene?

Poor menstrual hygiene can lead to reproductive tract infections which can include urinary tract infections and cervicitis. Poor menstrual hygiene can also result in symptoms such as foul odour, skin rashes/itching and discomfort.

| Is it normal to have a vaginal discharge?

A non-itchy, colourless, odourless, mild discharge is normal and experienced by many girls. This does not require any treatment. The amount of this discharge can vary across the month.

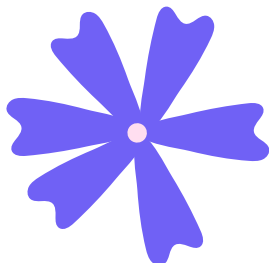
If the discharge is blood stained, brownish, accompanied by itching or has a foul smell, it is important to seek medical advice as this may mean an infection.

| What are practices of good personal hygiene for females?

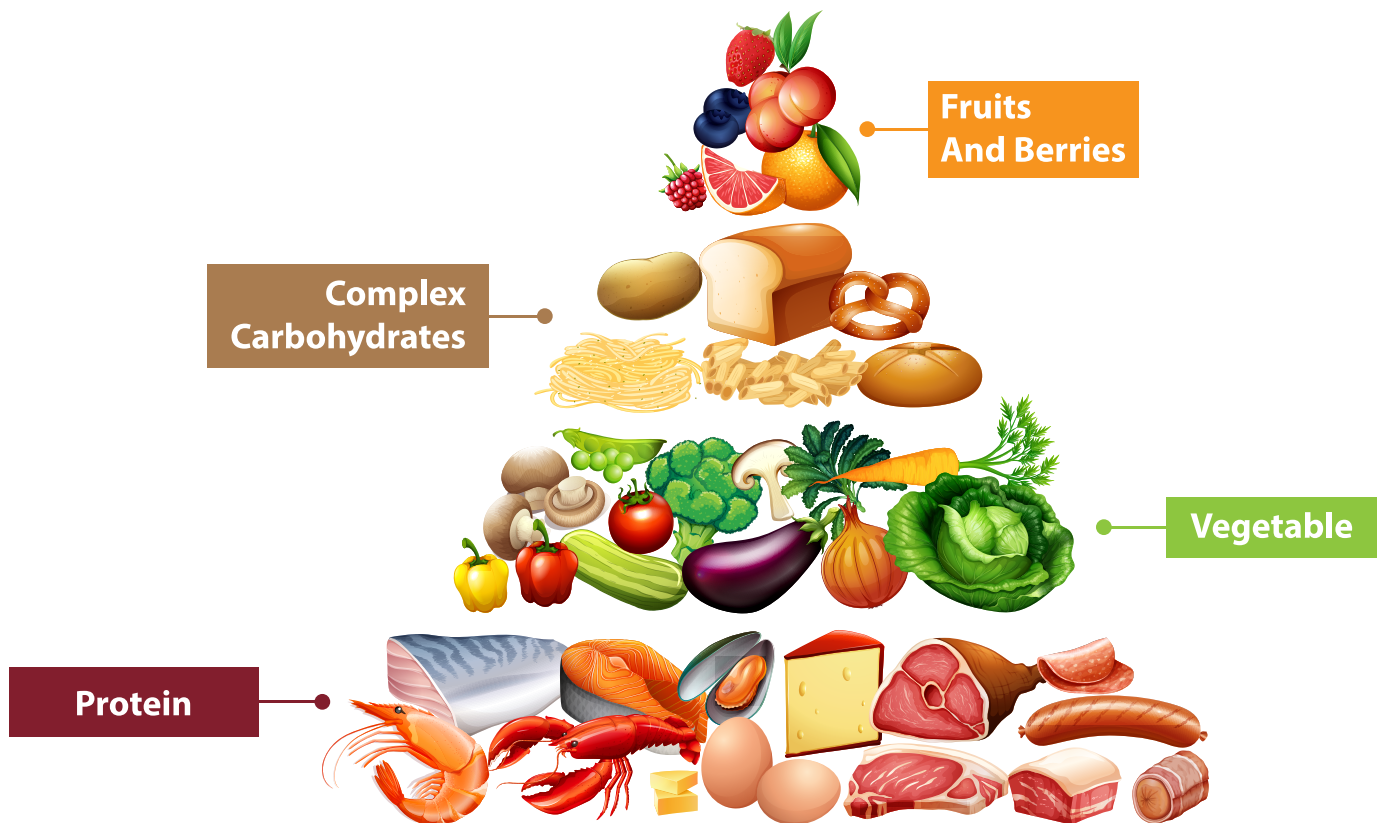
It is preferred to wear cotton underwear that is washed daily and dried in the sun.

When using the toilet to urinate, it is important to wash and dry the genital area every time. Gentle soap can be used on the external genital area, but should not be applied inside the vagina. Make sure you use a non irritative mild soap in the genital area.

When wiping the genital area, always clean from front to back (vagina to anus).



06 NUTRITION DURING MENSTRUATION



What should I eat during my period?

It is important to replenish your iron stores as you lose blood during your period by eating iron rich foods such as red meat, seafood and leafy greens. Eating vitamin C rich foods can increase absorption of iron by the body.

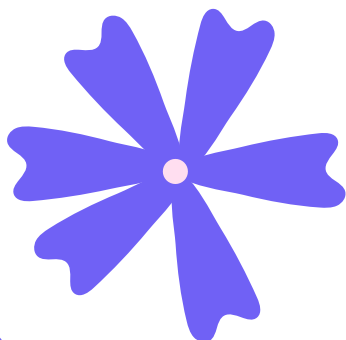
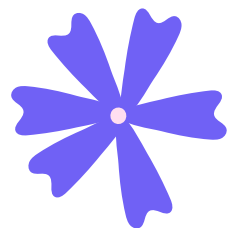
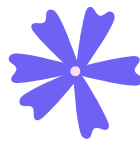
07 SEXUAL ACTIVITY DURING MENSTRUATION

| Can I have sex whilst on my period?

Yes, if you and your partner are comfortable, you can have sex whilst on your period.

| Can I get pregnant if I have sex whilst on my period?

Although very unlikely, if you have irregular periods, there is a small chance to get pregnant from sex during your period.



08 MEDICAL ISSUES WITH MENSTRUATION

Common Menstrual Conditions

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS)

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome is a common medical condition affecting about 1 in 10 females and is caused due to a combination of environmental and genetic factors.

It is one of the commonest reasons for irregular or absent periods. Other main symptoms of PCOS include an increase in the male hormone testosterone which results in acne, increase facial and body hair (known as hirsutism)

and loss of head hair, and an increased number of cysts on the ovaries (during a scan).

Additional symptoms include difficulty losing weight, darkening of skin over the neck and underarms, mood changes, sleep problems and difficulty getting pregnant.

Treatment includes a combination of lifestyle changes and medication.

Pre-menstrual Syndrome



Some menstruators may notice some physical and/or emotional changes before or around the time of their period.

These can include:

- » Development of acne (pimples)
- » Bloating
- » Fatigue
- » Backache
- » Sore breasts (breast pain)
- » Headache
- » Food craving
- » Depression or a low mood
- » Irritability
- » Difficulty to concentrate
- » Difficulty in handling stress

Other common reasons for irregular menstruation:

- » Menopause (irregular periods can occur in the years leading to menopause – explained below)
- » Menarche (the first period – irregular periods can occur for a year after menarche)
- » PCOS
- » Thyroid conditions
- » Stress
- » Hormonal medications and contraceptives
- » Certain cancers of the reproductive system (cervical or uterine cancer)

Other common reasons for absent (no) menstruation:

- » Pregnancy
- » Stress
- » Menopause
- » Hormonal medications and contraceptives

Other common reasons for painful menstruation:

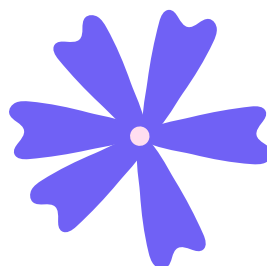
- » Fibroids (non-cancerous masses in the uterus)
- » Infections of the uterus
- » Certain cancers of the reproductive system (cervical or uterine cancer)

When to seek help:

- » No features of puberty by the age of 14 years
- » No menstruation by the age of 16 years
- » Irregular menstruation - Menstruation occurs more often than every 21 days or more prolonged than every 35 days
- » Absence of menstruation for more than 6 months
- » Excessive bleeding – bleeding for more than 7-10 days or soaking through a pad/tampon every 2-3 hours
- » Severe abdominal pain or mood changes (sadness, anger or anxiety) during or around the days of menstruation that prevents a menstruator from conducting their day to day activities (school or work)

Where to seek help:

- » Local Midwife
- » Local Government MOH Clinic
- » Local Government Hospital
- » Private Hospital
- » Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka – No.37/27, Buller's Lane, Colombo-07, Sri Lanka (Telephone Number – 0112555455)



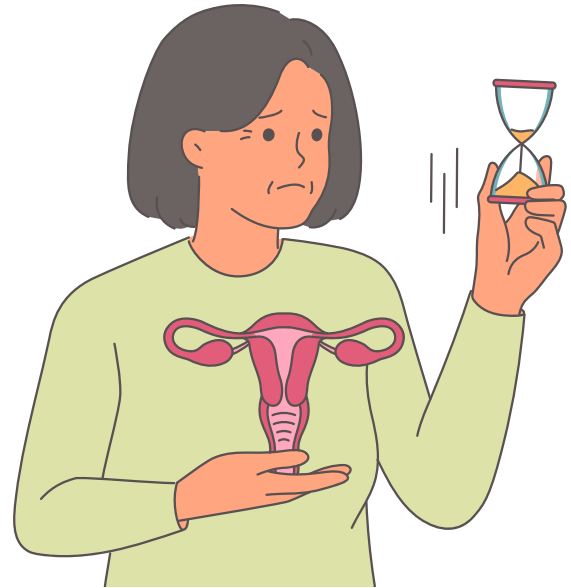
09 MENOPAUSE

What is Menopause?

Menopause is a natural biological process, whereby menstruation stops, and the ovaries stop producing eggs. It is usually diagnosed if there is no menstruation for a period of 12 months. The average age of a woman reaches menopause is 51 years, however this can range between 45 to 55 years.

When close to the age of menopause, perimenopausal symptoms can be experienced as the female hormone levels in the body (the hormone oestrogen) decreases.

Menopause occurs naturally but may also occur early due to surgery when the ovaries are removed, due to genetic reasons and due to cancer treatments (chemotherapy).



What are the symptoms of Menopause/Perimenopause?

These symptoms include:

- » Mood swings (irritability, anxiety, low mood)
- » Hot flashes
- » Night sweats
- » Irregular menstruation (before eventually becoming absent)
- » Difficulty sleeping
- » Forgetfulness
- » Palpitations (feeling a fast heartbeat)
- » Recurrent urinary tract infections
- » Change in body shape
- » Pain whilst having sexual intercourse
- » Reduced sex drive
- » Headaches
- » Joint pain
- » Breast pain

These symptoms can significantly affect a woman's relationships and her day-to-day activities. They can last for months or years.

What are some medical conditions associated after menopause (postmenopausal period)?

Due to the lack of the hormone oestrogen, postmenopausal women are at a higher risk of:

- » Osteoporosis
- » Heart disease
- » Vaginal dryness
- » Urinary issues (leaking)

How is menopause diagnosed?

Menopause is diagnosed clinically when there have been no menstrual periods for 12 months. Blood tests may also be used to diagnose menopause.

How can menopause be treated?

Menopause can be effectively managed using a combination of lifestyle changes and medication.

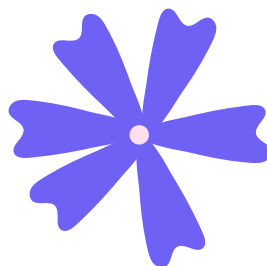
- » Symptoms of menopause can also be individually managed, e.g. Primrose evening oil capsules can be used to ease breast pain.
- » Symptoms due to a lack of oestrogen can be managed with hormone replacement therapy where artificial oestrogen supplements are given to improve the menopausal transition.
- » The risk of acquiring conditions like osteoporosis can be reduced by eating a healthy balanced diet with protein and calcium rich foods, stopping smoking and alcohol intake, reducing consumption of salty and oily foods, and by regularly exercising.
- » Mental symptoms can be managed by engaging in relaxation activities such as exercise and yoga, or by taking medication.

When to seek help

- » Symptoms of menopause/perimenopause are significantly affecting relationships and day-to-day activities
- » Experiencing any post-menopausal bleeding (vaginal bleeding that occurs after menopause)
- » For routine testing including screening for breast and cervical cancer, diabetes and heart conditions.

Where to seek help:

- » Local Midwife
- » Local Government MOH Clinic
- » Local Government Hospital
- » Private Hospital
- » Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka – No.37/27, Buller's Lane, Colombo-07, Sri Lanka (Telephone Number – 0112555455)
- » The Menopause Society of Sri Lanka - <https://menopause.lk>



08 MENSTRUAL STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION IN SRI LANKA

What is Menstrual Hygiene Stigma and Discrimination?

Menstruation is a natural and healthy part of life for many girls and women that occurs approximately on a monthly basis. However, in Sri Lanka as in many other countries, it is often surrounded by silence, shame, and misinformation.

Menstrual hygiene stigma refers to the negative beliefs, attitudes, and cultural norms that view menstruation as something dirty, impure, or shameful. Discrimination happens when these beliefs lead to unfair treatment of menstruating individuals, preventing them from fully participating in daily life.

In many communities, especially in rural and estate areas, menstruating girls are discouraged from entering religious spaces, preparing food, or interacting with boys and men.

For example, in the estate sector, women have shared that menstruating girls are not allowed to go to temples (kovils) or even be near boys, as it is believed to bring harm to them. In some families, food touched by menstruating women is discarded, and the girls themselves may be made to feel unclean or unworthy.

In Jaffna and other parts of the Northern Province, cultural myths lead to harmful practices such as avoiding certain foods like pineapple or drinking less water during menstruation, based on the false belief that it can cause excessive bleeding. Bathing is sometimes restricted due to fears that it will harm the girl's health. These deeply rooted cultural ideas are myths, creating confusion and anxiety for young girls, often making them feel ashamed of their own bodies.

Common Forms of Menstrual Stigma and Discrimination in Sri Lanka:

» Restrictions on Activities:

Girls may be banned from attending religious places and events, family gatherings, or sports during their period.

» Rituals for the first period:

Rituals when a girl first gets her period often requires the girl to stay alone in a room for some time, away from the “male gaze”. During this time, she may be forced to consume only a certain type of food and may not be allowed to bathe. These rituals can hinder a girl's activities and mental health.

» Limited Access to Menstrual Products:

Many girls and women do not have access to affordable, safe menstrual products. This leads to “period poverty,” and can also cause health issues and feelings of embarrassment.

» Poor Sanitation Facilities:

A lack of clean, safe, and private toilets in schools and public places makes it difficult for girls to manage their periods with dignity.

» **Education and Work Barriers:**

Girls may miss school during their periods due to lack of products or proper facilities. Similarly, women might face challenges at work when menstrual needs are not acknowledged.

» **Cultural Beliefs About Disposal:**

In some areas, people believe used sanitary pads must be burned or buried to avoid bad luck, evil spirits, or even infertility.

» **Negative Portrayals in Media:**

The media often presents menstruation as disgusting or embarrassing, making women feel flawed or ashamed of their bodies.

| Why Is Menstrual Stigma a Problem?

» **Lack of knowledge on menstruation:**

Due to existing stigmas and taboos, menstruators are less likely to openly discuss menstrual health issues. This can lead to a delay in seeking medical advice for menstrual health problems and lead to the continuation of harmful myths and misconceptions about periods.

» **Health Risks:**

Poor knowledge on menstrual hygiene can lead to infections and other reproductive health issues, especially when clean water, soap, and safe products are not available.

» **Disruption to Education:**

When girls stay home from school every month, it affects their learning, self-esteem, and future opportunities.

» **Economic Impact:**

Discrimination at the workplace or lack of support during periods can hold women back from earning and progressing in their careers.

» **Mental Health Effects:**

Constant shame and silence around periods can lead to anxiety, low self-confidence, and feelings of isolation.

» **Gender Inequality:**

Menstrual stigma is part of a larger issue of gender inequality, as it limits the freedom, rights, and voices of girls and women.

Common Myths and Taboos in Sri Lanka and the Truths behind Them:

1. Myth: Menstrual blood is Dirty or Dangerous

In many Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim families, menstruating girls are kept away from temples and religious rituals. Some are even told they bring bad luck. However, menstrual blood just consists of blood and uterine tissue. It is not dirty or dangerous.

2. Myth: Girls Should Not Bathe During Periods

Some people believe bathing during periods can cause illness or infertility. This is not true. In fact, bathing is important when menstruating as it keeps the body clean, reduces infection risks, and helps girls feel fresh and relaxed.

3. Myth: Menstrual Products Must Be Disposed of Secretly

In some rural areas; girls are told to burn or bury used pads in secret. This comes from superstitions, not science. While proper disposal is important for hygiene and the environment, doing it secretly adds to shame.

4. Myth: Certain Foods Should Be Avoided

Girls are often told to avoid fish, eggs, sour fruits, or green vegetables like gotu kola and mukunuwenna. However, these foods are full of nutrients, iron, protein, and vitamins that help during menstruation. It is important when menstruating to have a balanced diet, rich in proteins and iron-containing foods.

5. Myth: Getting Your Period Means You're Ready for Marriage

When a girl gets her first period, some families hold big ceremonies like “poo vadai” in Tamil or “malwara mangalya” in Sinhala. While these may be meant to celebrate, they can also pressure girls into early marriage and/or bring unwanted attention to them. Some families even take loans for these events, affecting their ability to support the girl's education. Whilst having a period means that a girl can get pregnant, it does not mean she is ready for marriage.

6. Myth: Women Are Too Weak or Moody to Lead during Periods

People often think girls cannot do sports, study well, or take leadership roles during their period. Whilst some discomfort is normal, girls can manage their periods with rest, nutrition, or safe pain relief medication when required. Menstrual cramps do not affect a girl's intelligence or ability. If a girl feels too weak, moody or has excessive pain during her period, it is important to encourage her to seek medical advice.

7. Myth: Only Real Women Menstruate

Some women don't get periods due to health conditions or medical treatments. Transgender women may also not menstruate. Saying only real women get periods excludes many people and is unfair.

8. Myth: Menstruation Should Not Be Discussed

In many homes; periods are not talked about openly. This silence leads to confusion, misinformation, and fear. When we talk openly, everyone can learn how to support menstruating individuals.

9. Myth: All Women Are Moody during Their Period

Hormonal changes affect people in different ways. While some girls feel more emotional, others do not. It's wrong to say that all girls are moody or to blame feelings only on their period. If a girl feels too during her period, it is important to encourage her to seek medical advice.

10. Myth: Menstruation is a Women's Issue Only

Menstrual health is a human issue. Boys, fathers, brothers, and male teachers all have a role to play. When boys and men understand periods, they can become more supportive to their menstruating friends and family members.

Conclusion: Let's End the Shame and Support Each Other

Menstrual stigma and discrimination are still common in many parts of Sri Lanka. Even though some traditions may be meant to protect girls, they often end up hurting their confidence and limiting their opportunities.

To change this, we all have a role to play whether we are students, teachers, parents, or community leaders. Together, we can:

- » Share correct information about menstruation.
- » Provide access to affordable, hygienic menstrual products.
- » Make sure schools and public places have clean private toilets.
- » Encourage boys and men to talk about and support menstrual health.

Periods are not something to hide. They are a sign of health and strength. Let's create a world where girls and women feel proud, not ashamed, of their bodies. When we break the silence and challenge myths, we help every girl stay in school, stay healthy, and follow her dreams.



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SCAN ME

