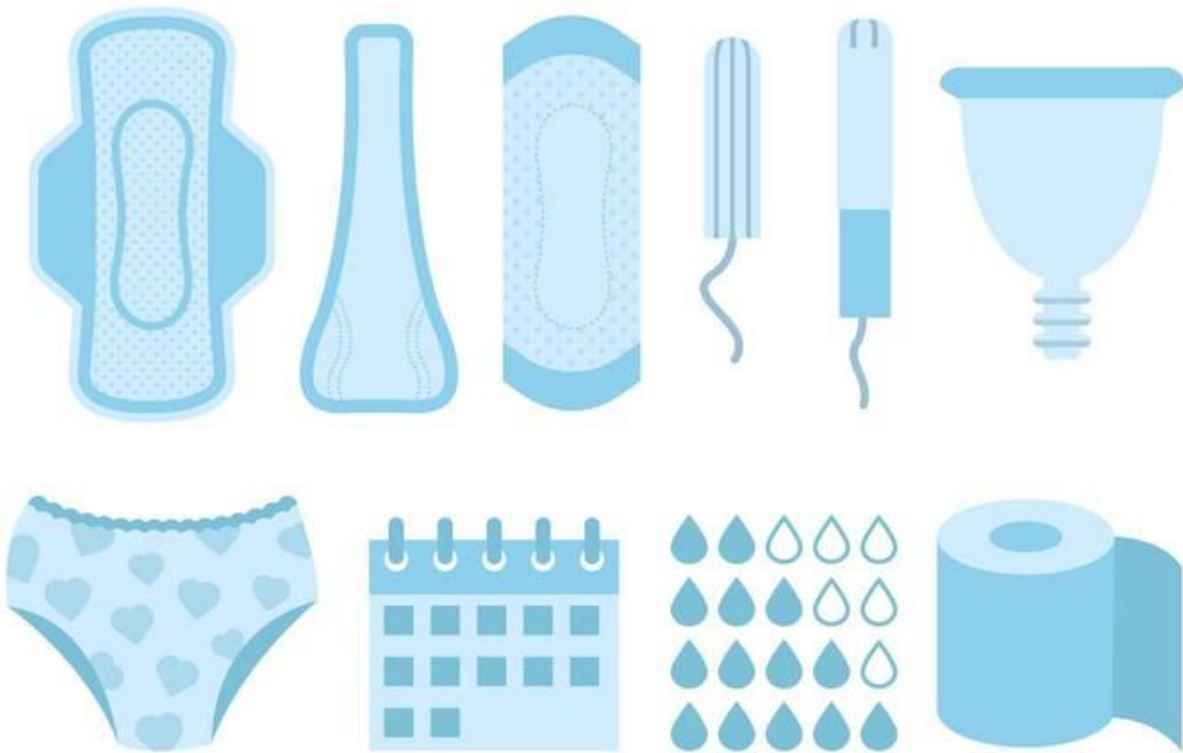


A Little Something Up Her Sleeve

Attitudes Surrounding Menstruation and Menarche in Adolescents of the United States



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Overview and Disclaimer

Menstruation occurs in people worldwide and is a biological, and often societal, benchmark of sexual maturity. However, Western societies have grown accustomed to treating it as an unclean, taboo subject. This view of an uncontrollable occurrence leads to negative attitudes in the population that experiences it, especially in groups that haven't had much of an opportunity to curate personal opinions of it. A number of both pre- and post-menarchal adolescents in the United States have reported either feeling fear or shame regarding their menstrual cycle and the accompanying physical and psychological happenings.

Prior to delving into a discussion of menstruation, a word on the language that will be used over the course of this essay: Most research done on menarche and adolescent menstruation uses language that is exclusive to women who do not menstruate (such as transgender women or women with amenorrhea) along with transgender men and gender non-binary people who do. Throughout this essay, I will be using the terms "girl" and "woman" to mean people who were designated female at birth (DFAB). These definitions are meant to counter the "implicit and often explicit biological determinism [that pervades] scientific and lay language" (Krieger 625).

Introduction to the Group

The first menstrual period, or menarche, tends to occur between the ages of 13 and seventeen in the United States. Girls in this age group tend to be in middle or high school, or while the adolescent is in grades 7-12th. The onset of menstruation occurs as a biological marker of sexual maturity as the ovaries begin to release eggs and the uterine wall thickens to prepare

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for implantation of a fertilized egg. This occurs during puberty, a time of rapid physical, mental, and social development for teenagers as their bodies and minds change from an immature, childish state into one of an adult. However, girls in this age group are often subjected to harsh cultural expectations regarding things like body image. They're also not given access to quality menstrual education without having to seek it out themselves.

Adolescent Perceptions of Menstruation

In many cases, the differences in attitudes surrounding menstruation vary between women who have begun to menstruate and women who have not. Premenarcheal individuals report positive feelings regarding beginning to menstruate, such as a feeling that they've achieved sexual maturity, whereas postmenarcheal girls of the same age report feeling more negative emotions such as fear and physical discomfort (Clark 233). A study conducted in a group of majority-premenarcheal Girl Scouts (median age 10.4) found that "a number of girls associated menstruation with growing up and an achieved potential for pregnancy" (Ernster 18).

In face-to-face interviews of public school girls in the 5th grade to 12th grade age range, Ruble and Brooks-Gunn asked their subjects what positive and negative aspects they associated with menstruation. Most frequently, the girls said that menstruation was a sign of maturity (72% of respondents said this), along with the ability to have children (30%), felt like more of a woman (26%), and being like their friends (22%). On the flip side, 46% of respondents felt that it was a hassle due to having to carry supplies or clean up the mess. The subjects also reported physical discomfort in 30% of the interviews, behavioral limitations (20%), and emotional changes (17%). The subjects in this study were asked whether they had any worries about

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menstruating, and 89% of the 70% who answered “yes” had worries that centered around uncertainty or possible embarrassment (*Experience of Menarche*, 1560-1561).

Menarche

The perception of how menarche will impact girls by those who have yet to begin menstruation it tends not match up to the actual experience of menarche. One study by Whisnant and Zegans found that only 30% of premenarcheal girls anticipated being scared. However, 80% of the postmenarcheal girls interviewed reported feeling anxious or upset by their first period (Grief 1416). For those who have experienced it, menarche can be "an intensely experienced, highly significant and potentially traumatic event. The girls in this study portrayed menarche as a primarily negative event... and expressed grave concerns about altered relations with family and peers, self-consciousness and embarrassment, intense apprehension they would be discovered and feelings of shame regarding soiling... Girls who had experienced menarche remembered such emotions as fright, dread, embarrassment, and self-consciousness" (Koff et al 156-157). However, Ruble and Brooks-Gunn are hesitant to assign the adjective “traumatic” to the experience. The women note that “the use of the term “trauma” associated with menarche refers to negativity of reaction..., extent of secrecy, and self-definitional crises, these data lead us to question whether menarche is as traumatic as is typically depicted” (Ruble 1565).

Studies have shown that menstruation contributes to a greater perceived maturity soon after it begins but can retroactively lead to negative perceptions riddled with feelings of shame, secrecy, embarrassment, and greater levels of self-consciousness (Swenson 203). Girls who feel

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unprepared for their first period were considerably more likely to express more negative feelings, fewer positive feelings, and a greater degree of surprise than girls who were prepared for and educated on what to expect when they began to menstruate (Ruble 1962).

Taboos

A major issue that contributes to the stigma surrounding menstruation in the United States is the development of taboos. A largely unconscious menstrual taboo exists in the Western culture. The patriarchal America fits Swenson's observation that "societies with the highest levels of social rigidity and male solidarity also have the strongest codification of menstrual taboos" (*Menarche and Menstruation: A Review of the Literature*, 204). From a young age, girls are socialized to hide their period from the world outside of their mothers, sisters, and close female friends. In fact, many girls found that their mothers were the most appropriate source of menstrual assistance. However, the girls have been socialized to hide their periods from men, including fathers and brothers. The girls from the Ernster study were very vocal about how periods were not to be discussed with brothers or male peers, and to only seek out their fathers as a last resort. One troop, however, echoed the ever-present sentiment that fathers were also off-limits, citing reasons including "it's naughty", "it's a bit like swearing", "it's embarrassing", and "my father would slap me across the face if I said anything" (*Expectations About Menstruation among Premenarcheal Girls*, 19). Some girls in the study also expressed their concern about what would happen if they started to bleed at school and had to tell their teacher why they had to leave. One girl was brave enough to bring up what would happen if the teacher was male and managed to appall the rest of the troop by doing so. The girls in this study brought

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to light that it's believed that menstruation falls exclusively within the female domain of communication.

One cannot discuss menstruation without addressing the discomfort that come with it. This includes not just the presence of absorbent material to an area that normally lacks it, but the physical side-effects; cramping, bloating, headaches, and digestive issues, to name a few. Outside of her social sphere of her mother, sisters, and close female friends, a girl is expected to hide these symptoms. Ruble notes that "the extent that discussing symptoms represents a social comparison process, a form of "one-upmanship" ...may exacerbate the nature and intensity of somatic complaints" (*Experience of Menarche*, 1564). This perpetuates the disbelief of men and medical professionals when they hear a woman complain of her symptoms and may contribute to the trepidation and anxiety that premenarcheal girls feel about their period.

The American Hygienic Imperative is one of the largest perpetrators of the taboo that menstruation is something dirty that has to be cleaned up. To this day, many supermarkets, drugstores, and grocery stores market tampons, pads, and other period supplies as "feminine hygiene products", implying that a lack of a way to hide a period is dirty and shameful. The title is also exclusionary to people who aren't "feminine" but still menstruate, including men who were born with vaginas. In fact, "a study of educational materials concluded that the main message conveyed to adolescent girls is that menstruation is a hygienic crisis" (Clark 231). In looking at menstrual products, one has to think about the loaded image of a girl hiding a tampon up the sleeve of her jacket or trying to figure out how to sneak her bag out of class to go to the bathroom rather than admit she's on her period.

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Lack of Education

Another issue to take into account is the correlation between a lack of education and a negative menarcheal experience (Ruble 1562). High information sources, such as mothers and older sisters, are often hesitant to offer advice. The taboos discussed above make it difficult to introduce quality menstrual education to the classroom even though “[the girls in this study]...perceived that menstruation education could increase mutual understanding between boys and girls” (Swenson 205). However, many health education curriculums lump sexual health into a few days, sandwiching reproduction and between sexually-transmitted infections and calling it a day. This proximity in subjects may lead girls to believe that reproductive health is something embarrassing to be kept quiet, in turn feeding the taboo found in the public school system.

The menstrual education curriculum has to adjust to expand upon both menstruation as a phenomenon and how to take care of oneself during it. When confronted with a tampon, the resounding reaction should not be “won’t it hurt?”, as discovered in the study conducted by Ernster. It also has to seek to tackle the “prevailing sets of beliefs, taboos, and established facts.. [and] address the fact that the package that menstrual knowledge shared among males does not exactly parallel that shared by their female counterparts” (Ernster 23). A 1975 study found that 77% of menstrual curriculums at the time were developed by manufacturers of menstrual products which served to reinforce the ideas of secrecy and shame that already came with the societal expectation of how one is to act while menstruating.

Psychological Impact of Menarche

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Today, girls are shaped by social media. Logging into Snapchat or Facebook, they're confronted by BuzzFeed lists with titles like "19 Period Horror Stories that Will Make You Scream". An inundation of this type of information, while working to confront social stigmas around it, can scare young women and dissuade them from seeking more medically sound information.

Girls are stereotyped as curling up in comfortable clothing on the couch with a bottle of painkillers in one hand and a spoon for whatever ice cream they're eating in the other. She's seen as an immobile creature while she's at home, but while she's out in the public eye, she's expected to smile and pretend that she's fine. Even if she doesn't experience terrible physical or mental side effects, she's often given a wide berth by anyone who even suspects she's menstruating. This cautionary attitude, when observed by premenarcheal girls may influence their unconscious perception of what it means to be someone who menstruates.

Conclusion

All around, America and menstruation have an unhealthy relationship. The majority of issues found in the common perception of menstruation could be easily resolved by introducing a standardized, high-quality menstrual education curriculum to all health classes and allowing a healthy environment for girls to talk candidly about any issues that may come out of their experience as a person who menstruates.

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