

## Original Research Article

# Knowledge, practices and restrictions related to menstruation in young girls: a study from North India

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The aim of the study was to study the awareness, myths and menstrual practices in young girls in a tertiary care center.

**Methods:** Predesigned structured questionnaire based study was done in 180 girls between the age group 13 to 17 years, in the outpatient department of a tertiary care hospital in New Delhi. Informed consent was taken before filling up the questionnaire.

**Results:** The participants were ignorant about the importance of proper hygiene and faced a lot of restrictions related to daily life during their periods. 68% participants lacked adequate knowledge about the physiology of menstruation. 45% girls were informed regarding menstruation by mothers, sisters and friends whereas teachers played a limited role. 30% girls were using sanitary pads, while most were still using homemade cloths. Pads were being reused in every cycle and they were dried in damp places, preferably during night. Lack of awareness and appropriate care for menstrual morbidities was seen in these girls, which affects their educational attainment. Age old myths and practices still have a lot of impact on the Indian household.

**Conclusions:** Ignorance and myths regarding menstruation still prevail in our society. The need of the hour is starting educational campaigns and schools based initiatives which can educate the girls. Thought should be given in manufacturing low cost sanitary pads as a national program. People especially in the rural set up should be encouraged to improve women's social and reproductive health situation and counselling should be provided in relation to sanitation and disposal.

**Keywords:** Menstruation, Menstrual hygiene, Myths

## INTRODUCTION

'Talking about menstruation has been a taboo even among planners. It received the attention of the Ministry of Health only in 2011. Close to 70% per cent of Indian women risk getting severe infection, at times causing death, due to poverty, ignorance and shame attached to their menstruation cycle'.<sup>1</sup> According to United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), adolescents contribute to about 20% of the total population, out of which; 15-19

years constitute 10% and majority lives in rural areas so there is a large population which is ignorant, uneducated and needs attention.<sup>2</sup> Menarche is an important and inevitable phase in a girl's life. Apart from the biological changes in the body, girls experience a lot of social, emotional and mental challenges as well. The preparedness to tackle and deal with menarche is very poor in our society. As they are not taught and explained about it in a scientific manner poor girls are left to face the experience of their first period, all on their own. This

experience can be horrible at times and leave a lifelong unpleasant psychological impact. An Indian study has reported that young girls are generally told nothing about menstruation until their first experience.<sup>3</sup> It is even more dangerous when the source of information is itself ignorant. Poor hygiene and inadequate self-care practices account for major morbidity and health complications in this age group, many a time's girls invent their own methods to deal with the problems. Though physiological, in India and many places worldwide menstruation is something which is not discussed and involves a lot of stigmas and illogical practices. Especially in rural India girls hardly come up with problems associated with their periods and feel nervous to talk about it. This 'culture of silence' has prevailed from the long-standing taboo attached to menstruation and menstrual hygiene practices in India. Research shows that a large number of women and girls possess inappropriate knowledge on menstruation and it is based on the information passed by peers and female family members. The socio-cultural taboos and beliefs in menstruation are very deep rooted and the problem is further complicated by illiteracy. Menstrual practices are also affected by religion and region, each religion has its own beliefs but overall the practice of myths and restrictions remains the same. Apart from the daily lifestyle restrictions there are various thoughts concerning menstrual blood too. Though already considered impure and dirty, in some cultures women believe that menstrual blood can be used for dangerous activities and witchcraft, so the girls are advised not to dry the used clothes in front of anyone.<sup>4</sup> As a result of they are forced to dry the clothes in damp and dark areas which can pose serious health hazards. These practices not only affect the overall development of the growing girls but are also associated with negative health implications. The problem is multifactorial and wide spread and there is the need to follow a strategic approach in dealing with it. There is a need to start nationwide awareness and education programs to educate our teenagers so that they grow up into mature and healthy women.

The current paper aimed to study and discuss menstruation related myths prevalent in a small cohort of young girls.

## **METHODS**

### ***Study period***

The study was taken up from February 2017 –July 2017 in a tertiary care hospital in New Delhi.

### ***Place of study***

The subjects were recruited from the outpatient department of the Gynecology department at Maulana Azad medical college New Delhi, India.

### ***Study group***

The study group comprised 180 girls from age group of 13-17 years. It was a mixed population of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh community. The girls were taken irrespective of their socioeconomic (however most of them belonged to the lower middle class) and marital status. All those who consented were enrolled for the study.

### ***Inclusion criteria***

All girls visiting the gynecology OPD of Maulana Azad medical college for any problems were enrolled in the study. Consents were ensured before enrollment.

### ***Exclusion criteria***

Girls who refused to participate were not enrolled.

### ***Data collection***

A predesigned, structured questionnaire was used for the study. The data collection was based on personal interview of the subjects. The participants were explained that the collected data would be only used for the purpose of the study and they could be benefitted by the doctors giving them the right understanding on many aspects of menstruation. Each girl was given on an average 20 minutes. The language used was simple and the one best understood by them.

### ***Data analysis***

Quantitative data from the survey was analyzed using proportions through Windows Microsoft Excel software.

### ***Ethical considerations***

The rights, anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents were respected in all phases of the study. Informed verbal consent was obtained from the participants before data collection. The type and purpose of the survey, absence of any associated risks involved in the study and the freedom to discontinue the questioning process at any stage and were explained.

## **RESULTS**

The results showed that girls were quite ignorant about the physiology of menstruation (Table 1).68% girls admitted that they don't consider menstruation as a normal process (may be related to a disease or curse by the gods) and 66% of girls were completely unprepared for their first menstrual experience. It is important that the girls get the right information from the right source. 45% girls were educated by their mothers and family and 25% by friends. Teachers contributed 15% in this matter and 7% girls were unaware and uninformed. It was interesting to know that girls never bothered to ponder,

the source of bleeding during menstruation.66% girls were without an answer on this question while 19% knew the uterus was the source of bleeding. On asking whether the process is specific for girls female 80% said yes.74% participants believed it to be period of impurity for the girls (Table 1).

**Table 1: Information about menstruation in the study subjects (n=180).**

|  | N (%)      |
|--|------------|
| <b>Is it natural to have periods</b>         |            |
| Yes  | 56 (31.1)  |
| No   | 124 (68.8) |
| <b>Were you aware of it before menarche</b>  |            |
| No   | 120 (66.6) |
| Yes  | 60 (33.3)  |
| <b>Source of information</b>                 |            |
| Mother and family                            | 82 (45.5)  |
| Friends                                      | 46 (25.5)  |
| Teacher                                      | 28 (15.5)  |
| Media  | 10 (5.5)   |
| Not informed                                 | 14 (7.7)   |
| <b>What is the source of menstrual blood</b> |            |
| Uterus                                       | 35 (19.4)  |
| Vagina                                       | 26 (14.4)  |
| Don't know                                   | 119 (66.1) |
| <b>Is it specific to females</b>             |            |
| Yes  | 145 (80.5) |
| No   | 35 (19.4)  |
| <b>Is it a time of impurity in females</b>   |            |
| Yes  | 134 (74.4) |
| No   | 46 (25.5)  |

Around 62% girls were using homemade cloths (preferably of cotton) and these were used repeatedly after washing in every cycle. (Table 2) Sanitary pads available in the market were used only by 30% girls. Cost of pad was a concern for not using while, 14% girls used cotton as an absorbent. Questions related to hygiene revealed that only 5% girls changed the pads more than 5 time a day, while the majority of them (60%) did it only 1-2 times, though they also admitted that they feel the wetness of the cloth all day but they continued to change pad at this frequency also. Homemade pads were washed and stored for future use by 54% girls whereas 31% threw them and used a fresh one next time. The routine wash of perineum with water was done by 43% girls and 62% refrained from doing so. Majority of the girls preferred to dry the pads inside the room and at a place where people cannot see it. These places were often damp and without the access of sunlight. This is an important point from health perspective; we need to educate girls about the importance of this simple step (Table 2).

76% girls admitted that they were not allowed to have the food of their choice and the main foods to be avoided were spicy, sour and cold foods. 87% girls were not

allowed to visit temples and religious places during this time. Almost 80% girls admitted that entering kitchen was not allowed during menstruation. 61% subjects told that sharing beds with other family members was not allowed during this time. After the cessation of cycles taking a head bath was mandatory and 56% girls were practicing this routine. 74% participants were advised not to indulge in heavy household work and cycling and other sports during those days (Table 3).

**Table 2: Practices followed during menstruation.**

|  | N (%)      |
|--|------------|
| <b>Material used during menstruation</b> |            |
| Homemade pad                             | 112 (62.2) |
| Sanitary pad                             | 54 (30)    |
| Cotton pads                              | 14 (7.7)   |
| <b>Pads changed per day</b>              |            |
| 1-2                                      | 109 (60.5) |
| 3-4                                      | 56 (31.1)  |
| More than 5                              | 15 (8.3)   |
| <b>Wash the perineum after toilet</b>    |            |
| Yes                                      | 78 (43.3)  |
| No                                       | 112 (62.2) |
| <b>Disposal of pads</b>                  |            |
| Throw in waste                           | 56 (31.1)  |
| Store for further use                    | 98 (54.4)  |
| Burn it                                  | 9 (5)      |
| Flush in toilets                         | 17 (9.4)   |
| <b>Drying of homemade pads</b>           |            |
| Dry inside rooms                         | 121 (67.2) |
| Sun dry                                  | 59 (32.7)  |

**Table 3: The myths associated with menstruation.**

|  | N (%)      |
|--|------------|
| <b>Food restrictions</b>                 |            |
| Yes                                      | 138 (76.6) |
| No                                       | 42 (23.3)  |
| <b>Allowed to go to religious places</b> |            |
| Yes                                      | 22 (12.2)  |
| No                                       | 158 (87.7) |
| <b>Allowed to enter kitchen</b>          |            |
| Yes                                      | 32 (17.7)  |
| No                                       | 148 (82.2) |
| <b>Allowed to share beds</b>             |            |
| Yes                                      | 70 (38.8)  |
| No                                       | 110 (61.1) |
| <b>Routine head wash</b>                 |            |
| Yes                                      | 102 (56.6) |
| No                                       | 78 (43.3)  |
| <b>Restriction of heavy work</b>         |            |
| Yes                                      | 134 (74.4) |
| No                                       | 46 (25.5)  |

## DISCUSSION

Young girls often grow up with limited knowledge because of the shyness to discuss the process of menstruation. The informants to young girls are mothers, sisters and friends and if they are themselves ignorant and unaware many illogical myths and concepts are passed on to the next generation. Many girls still believe menstruation to be a disease. Similar observation was seen in the present study also. According to a report jointly by Water Aid, PATH, Zariya, Development Solutions and Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council only 55% of girls consider it a natural and normal physical process.<sup>5</sup> A survey reported that 87% of the women and girls are completely unaware about menstruation and do not have any knowledge about the purpose of menstruation as a biological process (UNICEF MHM).<sup>6</sup> In a study carried out by Nielsen in rural areas of Bihar and Jharkhand, a framework was created on the understanding that increased communication on the subject could lead to increased awareness.<sup>7</sup> This in turn would lead to change in practices and eventually benefit the lives of entire rural societies. Little is known in these girls about the importance of practicing hygiene during menstruation. They are like that because they have never been taught the do's and do not's for this period. As per the UNICEF menstrual hygiene– manage it well 75% of the girls use cotton cloths during their period, 27% of the girls in schools do not use any material at all and only 16% of the girls use sanitary napkins.<sup>3</sup> A study from Maharashtra India in 2015 reported that 33.5% girls use sanitary pads during menstruation whereas 41.6% girls use old clothes during menstruation.<sup>8</sup> The present study also reports that homemade pads are popular in use and they are washed and used multiple times. The cost of napkins remains a big issue, which makes them use cotton clothes, dry husk, cotton roles and even paper napkins. The problem is that girls are not comfortable letting these clothes dry under sun, and they hide them in damp areas and using these pads after this also invites infections and other diseases. Awareness campaigns are being run by the government of India and NGO for use of proper sanitary pads. Project BAALA is one such programme which creates awareness, promotes use of bio degradable sanitary pads and educating women to create their own sanitary pads which are cheaper and hygienic.<sup>9</sup> Government of India has approved a scheme to improve menstrual hygiene for 1.5 crore adolescent girls by distributing low cost sanitary napkins in rural areas under the National Rural Health Mission since 2010.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to educate girls regarding the need for bathing and general hygiene during this time. There are places in India where girls refrain from bathing which poses serious health and reproductive problems in later life. In our study 66% girls don't wash the perineum after passing urine. Government of India has also released national guidelines in 2015 December on the menstrual hygiene management which aims at providing the basic factual information on menstruation to adolescent girls.

Menstrual hygiene management is an integral part of the Swachh Bharat Mission Guidelines (SBM-G). The Menstrual Hygiene Management Guideline is issued by the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation to support all adolescent girls and women. It outlines what needs to be done by state governments, district administrations, engineers and technical experts in line departments; and school head teachers and teachers. Through awareness programs girls should be educated about the problems associated with menstruation which are dysmenorrhea, heavy bleeding, irregular cycles, premenstrual syndrome, intermenstrual spotting and other issues. Though these can be physiological also, most of the girls do not understand these can be associated with some underlying pathology. Approaching health care systems for such problems should be encouraged, more so in the rural settings where cultural and social beliefs overpower the logistics. An important cause of absence from school is dysmenorrhea about which young girls are shy of speaking.

In many settings menstruation is strongly associated with religious sentiments where girls are not allowed to visit religious places and offer prayers. In the present study also there were restrictions in going to temple, sharing beds, entering the kitchen and eating certain types of food. It is a ritual to have a head bath and wash all clothes at the start and end of menstruation. Apart from the daily activities, many dietary restrictions as well where girls are prohibited from having spicy and oily foods, not to touch food storage pots and pickles as well. Other restrictions are not going out for exercises and heavy work, restricted entry to the kitchen especially during the first three days, sleeping alone, not attending to family functions and avoiding cold drinks and cold food. We got positive answers for many such concepts in our study too. According to an Indian study of 2011 participating women reported that during menstruation the body emits some specific smell or ray, which turns preserved food bad. And, therefore, they are not allowed to touch sour foods like pickles.<sup>11</sup> It is believed that if a girl or women touches a cow while she is on her period, that the cow will become infertile– leading girls to associate their own bodies with curse and impurity. Every religion has its own thoughts regarding menstruation and by and large every religion in India considers menstruation to be a time of impurity. The fight against this is huge because of the large population and restricted receptivity of people to part with the old mindset. We need to fight with these myths and create healthy awareness in the growing girls, so that they grow up into mature and logical women and educate others too.

## CONCLUSION

We need to provide girls with education as well as supply of sanitary pads which are cheap and hygienic. The awareness of menstrual hygiene needs to be spread in the society. Education can bring major changes so strong policies and political reforms are required in which

teachers, village level workers, mass media and government organizations and non-government organizations can work together in spreading right information and help to eradicate age old myths and taboos.

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