



# *Well Women - A guide to Menstrual Health*

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## Why Menstrual Health Matters

Hello there!

We have put this guide together for all women young and old because understanding our bodies is an essential part of women's development! This guide seeks to provide you with free access to reliable and researched information. Moreover, according to a survey Kunashe Foundation undertook in January 2021, with which 500+ women participated, nearly 35% indicated that the main challenge they faced was inadequate access to menstrual health information. That's over 1 in every 3 women! So share this guide with the women you know, because you never know just how impactful this information can be.

Menstruation is a personal journey and there is no one size fits all but it can certainly be made more comfortable with the right tools. We have a big goal to eliminate period poverty and this goal can be achieved if we come together, as friends, colleagues or family members and ensure that every woman within our circle is informed and equipped. This is important because:

- Too many girls are missing school because of a lack of knowledge on how to manage their periods.
- Too many women are missing out on work or promotions due to absenteeism that is related to their menstrual health.
- There is a lack of urgency around access to safe water and sanitation and facilities.
- There is a lack of access to affordable sanitary products.
- Fact-based Menstrual Health Management is not being taught to girls leading to lifelong general misinformation.

This Well Women Guide will take you through all the basics concerning Menstrual Health, Hygiene and Management. According to the United Nations, International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) "Menstrual health and hygiene (MHH) encompass both menstrual health management (MHM) and the broader systemic factors that link menstruation with health, well-being, gender equality, education, equity, empowerment, and rights". We hope you enjoy this journey with us.

## Understanding the process: What is happening in my body?

Getting you to know about your menstrual health means understanding your body first and foremost. We are going to take you back to the classroom for a short while. From birth, your body is preparing you for menstruation through the growth and release of different hormones. All of these functions happen in what is called an Endocrine System.

### What Is the Endocrine System?

- The endocrine system is made up of glands that make hormones. Hormones are the body's chemical messengers. They carry information and instructions from one set of cells to another.
- The endocrine hormones help to control mood, growth and development, the way our organs work, metabolism, and reproduction.
- The endocrine system regulates how much of each hormone is released. This can depend on levels of hormones already in the blood, or on levels of other substances in the blood, like calcium. Many things affect hormone levels, such as stress, infection, and changes in the balance of fluid and minerals in the blood.

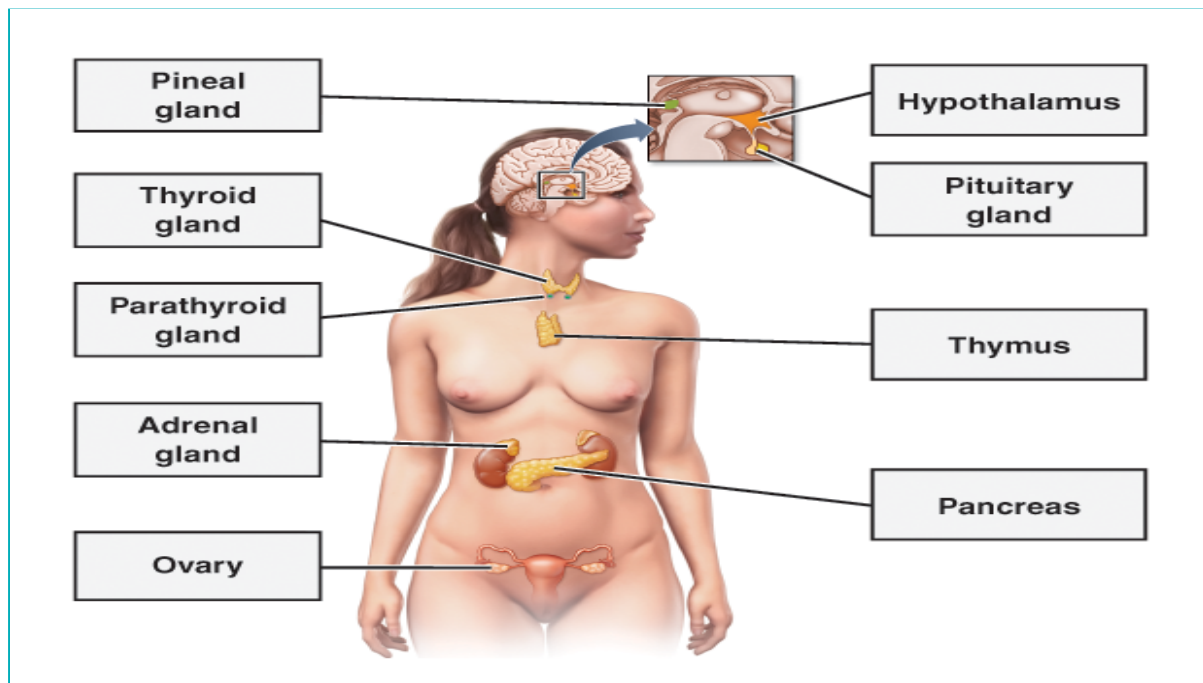
### Hormones & the Menstrual Cycle

HORMONES	SOURCE OF PRODUCTION	MAIN FUNCTION
Follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH)	Pituitary gland	It's responsible for the growth of ovarian follicles. Follicles produce estrogen and progesterone in the ovaries and help maintain the menstrual cycles in women.
Estrogen	Ovaries	Stimulate the female secondary sexual characteristics; repair of the wall of the uterus; controls ovulation.
Progesterone	Ovaries and Placenta	Prevents the wall of the uterus from breaking down
Luteinizing hormones (LH)	Pituitary gland	Triggers ovulation, and (with FSH) stimulates estrogen release
Gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH)	Hypothalamus	Stimulates the release of FSH and LH from the anterior pituitary.

Now that we know about how these different hormones contribute to our menstrual

cycle it is worth exploring where exactly they are produced in our beautiful bodies.

## Female Endocrine System

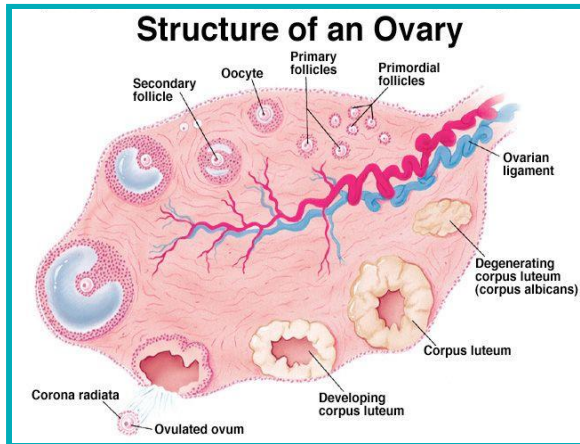


The image above shows the female endocrine system and all the glands that make part of it. We are going to explore the glands that produce hormones in line with menstruation.

**Adrenal gland:** These two triangular adrenal glands sit on top of each kidney. The adrenal glands have two parts, each of which makes a set of hormones and has a different function which includes making hormones called corticosteroids that help control salt and water to balance in the body, the body's response to stress, metabolism, the immune system, and sexual development and function. These glands are also responsible for the release of adrenaline.

**Hypothalamus:** The hypothalamus is in the lower central part of the brain. It links the endocrine system and the nervous system. Nerve cells in the hypothalamus make chemicals that control the release of hormones secreted from the pituitary gland. The hypothalamus gathers information sensed by the brain (such as the surrounding temperature, light exposure, and feelings) and sends it to the pituitary. This information influences the hormones that the pituitary makes and releases.

**Pituitary gland:** The pituitary gland is at the base of the brain, and is no bigger than a pea. Despite its small size, the pituitary is often called the "master gland." The hormones it makes control many other endocrine glands.



**Ovaries:** They make eggs and secrete the female hormones estrogen and progesterone. Estrogen is involved when a girl starts puberty. During puberty, a girl will develop breasts, start to accumulate body fat around the hips and thighs, and have a growth spurt. Estrogen and progesterone are also involved in the regulation of a girl's menstrual cycle. These hormones also play a role in pregnancy.

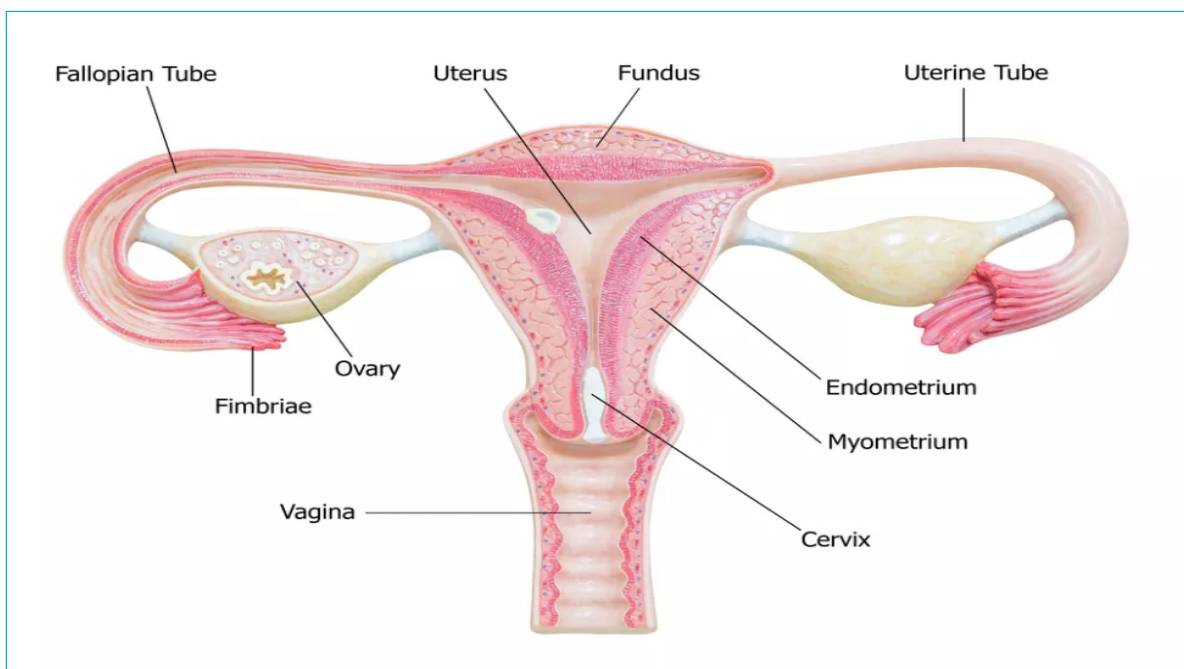
The female body is a beautiful interconnected networking system and there are so many factors that come into play for ladies to have a healthy menstrual cycle. The main organ that contributes significantly is the female reproductive system.

## Female reproductive system

A female reproductive system is designed to carry out several functions. It produces the female egg cells necessary for reproduction, called the ova or oocytes. The system is designed to transport the ova to the site of fertilization.

The fertilization of an egg by a sperm normally occurs in the fallopian tubes. The next step for the fertilized egg is to implant it into the walls of the uterus, beginning the initial stages of pregnancy. If fertilization and/or implantation does not take place, the system is designed to menstruate (the monthly shedding of the uterine lining)

Moreover, the female reproductive system produces female sex hormones that maintain the reproductive cycle.



**Cervix:** provides a passage between the vaginal cavity and the uterine cavity. The cervix is only about 4 centimetres long, projects about 2 centimetres into the upper vaginal cavity

**The endometrium:** is the lining inside the uterus. The endometrium contains numerous glands and increases in thickness during the menstrual cycle until ovulation occurs. The surface layers are shed during menstruation if conceptions do not occur

**Fallopian Tube:** also known as uterine tubes are tubes that stretch from the uterus to the ovaries and are part of the female reproductive system. The fertilized egg passes through the Fallopian tubes from the ovaries of female

mammals to the uterus.

**Fimbriae:** are small, fingerlike projections at the end of the fallopian tubes, through which eggs move from the ovaries to the uterus.

**Fundus:** is the superior-most region that will host a fertilized embryo as it grows into a baby.

**Myometrium:** is the middle layer of the uterine wall, consisting mainly of uterine smooth muscle cells. Its main function is to induce uterine contractions.

**Ovaries:** see under endocrine system

**The uterus:** also known as the womb, is an about 8 cm long hollow muscular organ. Once the egg has left the ovary it can be fertilized and implant itself in the lining of the uterus. The main function of the uterus is to nourish the developing fetus prior to birth

**Uterine tube:** see fallopian tube

**Vagina:** is a closed muscular canal that extends from the vulva, the outside of the female genital area to the neck of the uterus (cervix)

This brings us to the end of the short but intense biology portion of this guide. We are about to explore the science behind menstruation and things are about to get interesting!



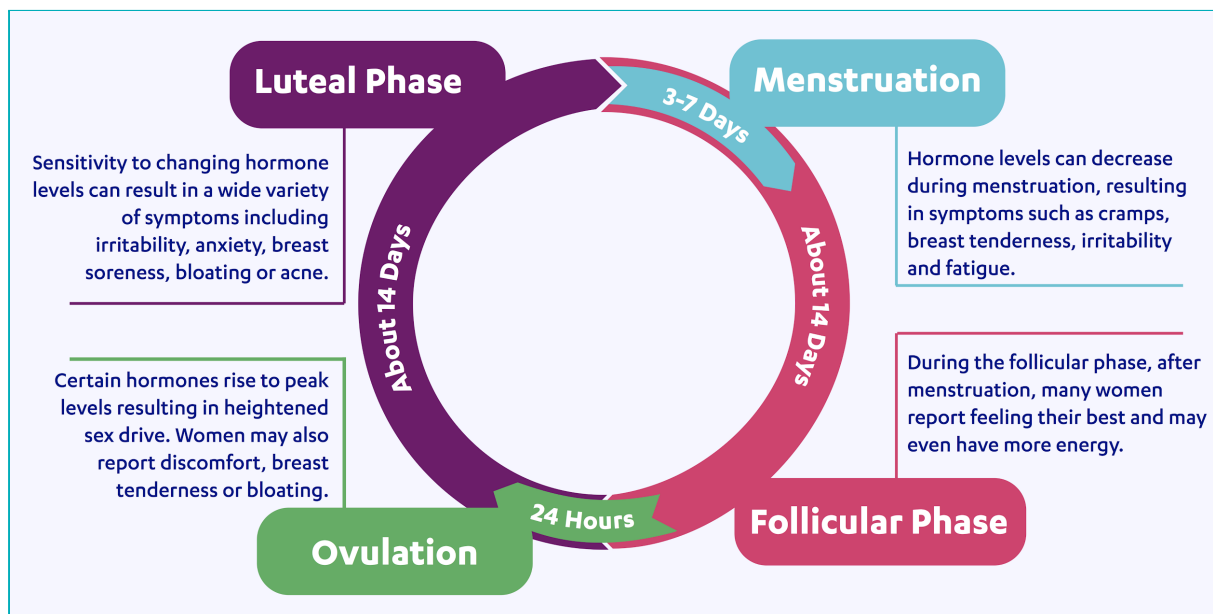
## The science behind menstruation

We would not be doing any justice to ourselves if we did not discuss the science associated with the menstrual cycle. The menstrual cycle is like the practical side of the biology lesson as we experience it first hand every month but do we know what really is happening during the beautiful wonder called the menstrual cycle?

"The menstrual cycle is the time from the first day of a woman's period to the day before her next period," says Toni Belfield, a specialist in sexual health information, and a trained fertility awareness teacher.

The length of the menstrual cycle varies from woman to woman, but the average is approximately 28 days. Within those days, there are four stages.

### Stages of the menstrual cycle



### Stage One: Menstrual phase

The Menstrual phase is the first stage of the menstrual cycle. This is when you get your period. This phase starts when an egg from the previous cycle is not fertilized. Because pregnancy has not taken place, levels of the hormones estrogen and progesterone drop. The thickened lining of your uterus, which would support a pregnancy, is no longer needed, so it sheds through your vagina. During your period, you release a combination of blood, mucus, and tissue from your uterus. You may experience period symptoms like these:

- cramps
- tender breasts
- bloating
- mood swings
- irritability
- headaches
- tiredness
- low back pain



On average, women are in the menstrual phase of their cycle for 3 to 7 days. Some women have longer periods than others.

### Stage two: Follicular phase

The follicular phase starts on the first day of your period (so there is some overlap with the menstrual phase) and ends when you ovulate.

It starts when the hypothalamus sends a signal to your pituitary gland to release follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH). This hormone stimulates your ovaries to produce around 5 to 20 small sacs called follicles. Each follicle contains an immature egg.

Only the healthiest egg will eventually mature. (On rare occasions, a woman may have two eggs mature.) The rest of the follicles will be reabsorbed into your body.

The maturing follicle sets off a surge in estrogen that thickens the lining of your uterus. This creates a nutrient-rich environment for an embryo to grow.

The average follicular phase lasts for about 16 days. It can range from 11 to 27 days, depending on your cycle.

### Stage three: Ovulation

Rising estrogen levels during the follicular phase trigger your pituitary gland to release luteinizing hormone (LH). This is what starts the process of ovulation. Ovulation is when your ovary releases a mature egg. The egg travels down the fallopian tube toward the uterus to be fertilized by the sperm. You can tell that you are ovulating by the following symptoms:

- a slight rise in basal body temperature
- thicker discharge that has the texture of egg whites

Ovulation happens at around day 14 if you have a 28-day cycle that is right in the middle of your menstrual cycle. It lasts for about 24 hours.

### Stage Four: Luteal Phase

After the follicle releases its egg, it changes into the corpus luteum. This structure releases hormones, mainly progesterone and some estrogen. The rise in hormones keeps your uterine lining thick and ready for a fertilized egg to implant. If you do get pregnant, your body will produce human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG). This is the hormone pregnancy tests detect. It helps maintain the corpus luteum and keeps the uterine lining thick. If you do not get pregnant, the corpus luteum will shrink away and be resorbed. This leads to decreased levels of estrogen and progesterone, which causes the onset of your period. The uterine lining will shed during your period. During this phase, if you don't get pregnant, you may experience symptoms of premenstrual syndrome (PMS). These include:

- Bloating
- Breast swelling, pain, or tenderness
- mood changes
- headache
- weight gain
- changes in sexual desire
- food cravings
- trouble sleeping

The luteal phase lasts for 11 to 17 days. The average length is 14 days.

All the stages of the menstrual cycle occur on a monthly basis for those that experience regular periods. Most women do have regular periods, however, there are some women that experience heavy periods, others experience painful periods while others do not experience a period at all. There are different reasons women could have challenges with their menstrual cycle which will be explored further in a later section.

## Period survival kit

Any woman will agree with me when I say being on your period at work or school can feel like a war zone. You can often feel like you are in a minefield filled with grenades ready to go off at any time. While many people master this over time, we believe you can be well prepared and avoid any embarrassment or leaks by having a handy period kit. This may include a variety of items, depending on your period but here are some suggestions:

**Wipes ladies' wipes:** When you are on your period you bleed and once the blood gets into contact with air it begins to smell. So, wiping using a tissue not cut it, ladies. You may need to use wipes as well. Wipes are easy to carry around, disposable and convenient. You don't need fancy high-end wipes, unscented baby wipes will do just fine.

**Painkillers:** If you suffer from menstrual cramps, then you definitely need to carry over the counter medication with you when you go to work or school. These painkillers can help you manage the pain. Remember to contact your doctor to find out what the best medication is for you.



**Hot water bottle:** A hot water bottle can come in handy just to ease those nasty menstrual cramps. Hot water bottles are known to help relax the uterus and improve blood flow to the uterus. Practice caution to avoid burning yourself, ladies.

**Comfort food:** This one is dedicated to all my food lovers out there. The jury is still out on this one but if you are anything like me then you will love this one. Healthy comfort food and a hint of dark chocolate can make you feel better and improve your mood.



**Comfy underwear:** Lastly, you need comfy underwear. Drastic times call for drastic measures. It's time to pull out all those "DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT" granny panties that are so comfortable and pack away the lacey underwear you love so much. You need to be as comfortable as possible and

cotton granny panties are the best to reduce the chances of leakage while allowing the vagina to breathe.

Feeling comfortable is paramount during your menstrual cycle so be sure to pack whatever you need in your kit together with some emergency sanitary wear. We are now going to explore the different options of sanitary wear so you can make well-informed choices.

# Menstrual Hygiene Management

## Sanitary Wear

There are several safe sanitary products available on the market. It's all up to you to decide which one is your cup of tea. The following will unpack the options available as far as menstrual hygiene materials are concerned to assist you in choosing the best one for you.

## Disposable Pads



Disposable pads just like vanilla-flavoured ice cream are the most common and relatable type of sanitary wear. They are like a right of passage for every girl once they experience their first period. Disposable pads are worn on the underwear to absorb menstrual blood. They cannot be reused, hence, they should be safely disposed of after up to 8 hours, depending on blood flow.

### Benefits

**Variety:** disposable pads are offered in a greater variety of shapes, sizes, absorbency levels, and brands so one has a wide range to choose from depending on preference.

**Availability:** disposable pads are readily available in all stores, hence, this is very convenient especially if you are travelling.

**Disposal:** Depending on your level of comfort, simply wrap the used pad or wash, wrap and then dispose of it safely.

**LeakProof:** When worn correctly (and changed regularly) sanitary pads with wings can reduce the risk of leaks and spoiled clothing.

### Challenges

**Potentially Harmful Chemicals:** Disposable pads are whitened with chlorine bleach, which produces a toxic byproduct called dioxin. Disposables also contain plastic chemicals. These are potentially harmful to sensitive skin.

**Long-term cost:** because disposable pads can only be used once there is an accumulative cost that comes with it.

**Environmental Impacts:** on average a woman will use 12,000 to 16,000 disposable pads, party-liners, and tampons in her lifetime, which all are harmful to the environment. According to Women's Environmental Network (2020), tampons, disposable pads, and panty liners along with their packaging and individual wrapping generate more than 200,000 tonnes of waste per year globally, and they all contain plastic, pads are around 90% plastic.

## Reusable Pads



Reusable pads are cheap, simple, sustainable and straightforward. They are worn on the underwear, to absorb menstrual flow and held in place usually by snaps. They are made from a variety of natural or synthetic materials. After use, they are washed, dried, and reused for up to five years depending on the quality.

## Benefits

**Reusable sanitary pads are made of breathable material:** as mentioned above, disposable pads are made of 90% plastic, hence there is moisture build-up when wearing a disposable pad. This results in bacteria build-up and sometimes yeast infections. However, because reusable pads often do not contain any plastic in them, they are more favourable to your vaginal health as they are breathable (made from products such as cotton) and do not cause moisture build-up.

**Great for those with sensitive skin:** reusable sanitary pads are thicker. But they're also cooler, 'breathable', and more gentle on sensitive areas. Moreover, they are not fragranced which can cause skin irritations

**Affordability:** Unlike disposable pads that you constantly need to purchase reusable pads are more economical. You can use reusable sanitary pads for up to five years depending on the quality and maintenance of the reusable sanitary pads. Hence, if you

are buying the reusable sanitary pads over the materials to make them by yourself the initial cost might seem more costly, however, it is a long-term investment.

## Challenges

**Maintenance:** Reusable pads require a significant amount of effort to maintain as they require regular washing and thorough drying outside.

**Availability of water:** washing a reusable sanitary pad requires a private and water-abundant facility. This can be a challenge for those without ready access to water and sanitation facilities.

**Stigma:** due to societal stigma, there is often a reluctance to dry pads outside in the sunlight due to privacy concerns, and lack of open-air drying can increase the presence of harmful bacteria on the pads if they are not dried properly.

## Menstrual Cups



The menstrual cup is a cup made of medical-grade silicone rubber that is inserted into the vagina to collect menstrual blood. Cups hold more blood than other methods, leading many women to use them as an alternative to tampons. Depending on your flow you can wear it for up to 12 hours.

## Benefits

**Sustainable:** The menstrual cups last up to 10 years.

**Low-irritant:** The materials are made for suit-sensitive individuals and leave you more naturally lubricated than tampons which draw away moisture.

**No laundry:** Washing is as simple as rinsing in a sink. Occasional boiling between cycles is also encouraged to sterilize the cup.

**No odour:** Unlike pads, the cup prevents blood from coming into contact with oxygen and thus, it does not generate a scent.



**Convenience when active:** When inserted correctly the cup is unnoticeable and allows you to wear it whilst doing sports, swimming, and bathing without being disrupted.

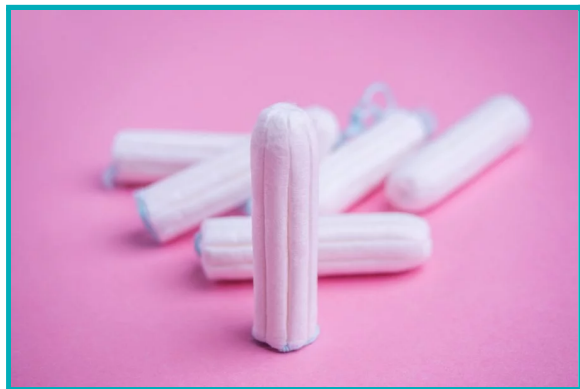
## Challenges

**Initial cost:** Menstrual cups are costly initially. They cost between USD\$10 to USD\$40 depending on the brand.

**Insertion and removal:** It takes a little practice to get used to the process of insertion and removal of the cup.

**Stigma:** The cup is a fairly new product and little is known about it in developing countries. Further, because of the nature of its use, the cup is often ignored as a relevant option for young girls who are not yet sexually active. Older women are more willing to try the cup, however many remain concerned about the size of the cup. A great deal of work needs to be done to inform society on the use of the menstrual cup.

## Tampons



Just like menstrual cups, tampons are also inserted into the vagina. They are placed inside the vagina to directly absorb the blood flow. Tampons are usually made of small rolled-up cotton and most tampons come with an applicator that can be used to pull it out. A tampon can be used for a maximum of 8 hours.

## Benefits

**Comfort:** Most women tend to find tampons more comfortable to wear than sanitary pads. Using tampons allows women to stay more active, like partaking in swimming, without being worried about them "falling" out of place.

**No visibility:** A pad can show through your pants but with tampons, you will no longer have to worry about lines that can potentially show

**No smell:** If you wear your pad for too long, it causes a foul odour. When you wear tampons, you can avoid the odour as long as you remove them in time.

**Wear any underwear:** When wearing pads, you need to wear underwear to prevent any potential leakage. With tampons, you can wear whatever underwear and clothes you like.

## Challenges

**Risk of toxic shock syndrome (TSS):** Tampon use may increase the risk of TSS. TSS is caused when strep bacteria develop in the vagina and is absorbed into the bloodstream. The symptoms of TSS include fever, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, dizziness, dehydration, muscle pain

**No way to know when to change:** Since a tampon is not visible during usage, it's difficult to tell whether you need to change it or not. If you don't realise that your tampon is over soaked, it may result in a stain.

**Not eco-friendly:** the overwrap material of a tampon is harsh on the environment as it does not decompose. Some studies show that chemicals are used to bleach the cotton used in tampons can result in them being inflammation.

Always remember that your sanitary wear is your choice. Make the best choice for yourself and also do not be afraid to try different combinations depending on your flow, mood and level of activity.

## Menstrual hygiene tips

**Change sanitary wear regularly:** During the monthly flow, change your sanitary wear after every four to six hours and this depends on one's flow. For those who have heavy flow changing more frequently is necessary. Before you change into new sanitary wear first clean or wipe. To prevent infections like urinary tract infection, vaginal infections, pad rash, and skin rashes.

**How to clean the genital area:** It is important to clean the genital area every time after using the toilet and keeping it as dry as possible in order to prevent chafing. When cleaning the genital area one has to begin from the vagina to the anus using clean warm water.

**Wash hands before and after changing sanitary wear:** It is vital to wash hands first before changing the sanitary wear because it helps to avoid bacteria from one's hands to enter the vagina which may result in infections.

**Keep some wet wipes and roll on hand:** During your menstrual cycle, you can experience hot flashes which led to sweating. Having wet wipes and roll-on on the go helps you to stay fresh and feel good.

**Discarding used sanitary wear:** Used sanitary wear is capable of spreading infections and can smell very bad. Wrapping it well before discarding it ensures that the smell and infections are contained.

**Vaginal/vulvar care** is a cornerstone of feminine hygiene routines. I cannot stress this enough ladies, the attention you give to your face should be the attention you give to your vagina if not more. Here are a few tips and tricks on caring for your vagina.

**Wash up!:** Please use warm water to clean. Dry thoroughly with a clean towel, preferably have a small soft towel meant for the sensitive area only.

**It's not peaches and cream!:** Your vagina will smell like a vagina, not peaches and cream because they are not peaches and cream! The vagina cleanses itself naturally in the form of normal, vaginal discharge. Avoid using douches and perfumed soaps unless prescribed by your physician. These products can upset the natural balance of your vagina.

**Just Breathe!:** Your vagina needs to breathe to avoid infections. One way is to get your vagina out of that bush. Where you can, trim up or wax to avoid sweat and dirt build-up. If possible, go commando when you go to bed. This will help your vagina to breathe but be careful in winter- you don't want to get a cold and have to explain this to your friends and family.

## Infections linked to Vaginal Health

Did you know that the vagina has a self-cleaning mechanism?. However, that does not mean that its ph is not disturbed at times. Exposure to bacteria or a change in the ph of the vagina can lead to infections. Below are some infections that can develop.

**Bacterial Vaginosis (BV):** is the most common vaginal infection in women of childbearing age, which happens when the normal bacteria (germs) in the vagina get out of balance, such as from douching or from sexual contact. Symptoms include vaginal discharge that can be white, grey, or thin and have an odour; burning or pain when urinating, or itching around the outside of the vagina. There also may be no symptoms.

**Thrush:** is a yeast infection, caused by the fungus *Candida albicans*, of the mouth and throat. Its hallmark is white patches in the mouth. It can also occur in the gastrointestinal tract and vagina and causes some types of diaper rash in infants.

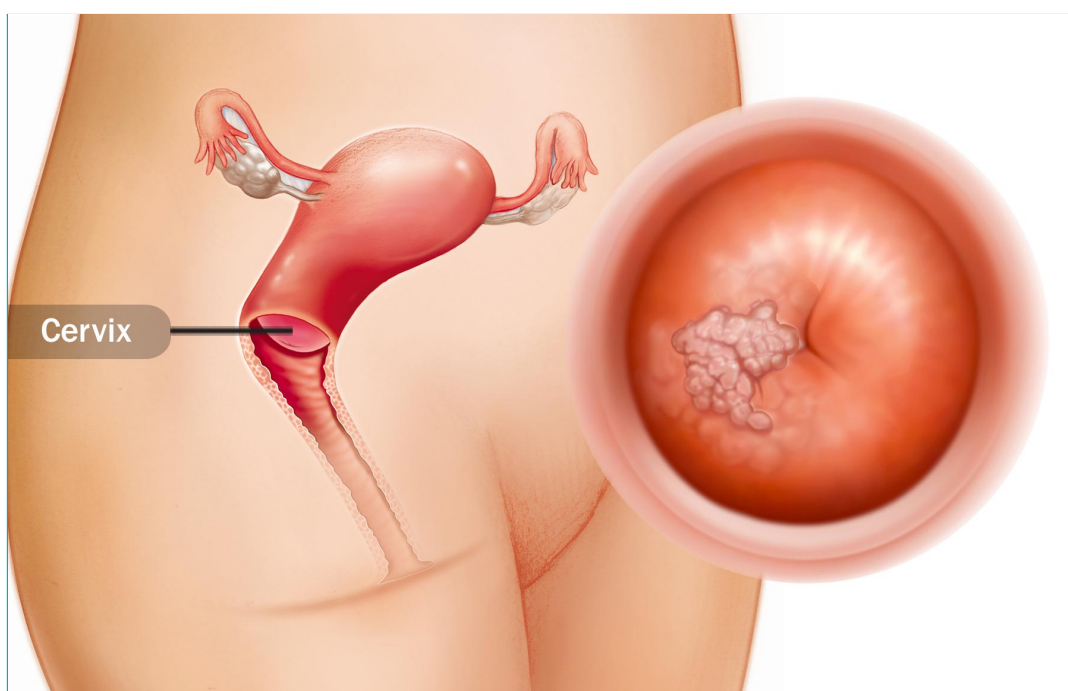
**Urinary Tract Infection (UTI):** is an infection anywhere in the urinary tract or organs that collect and store urine and release it from your body (the kidneys, ureters, bladder, and urethra). An infection occurs when microorganisms, usually bacteria from the digestive tract, cling to the urethra (opening to the urinary tract) and begin to multiply.

**Yeast Infection:** is a common infection in women caused by an overgrowth of the fungus *Candida*. It is normal to have some yeast in your vagina, but sometimes it can overgrow because of hormonal changes in your body, such as during pregnancy, or from taking certain medications, such as antibiotics. Symptoms include itching, burning, and irritation of your vagina; pain when urinating or with intercourse; and cottage cheese-looking vaginal discharge.

Often the body releases creamy vanilla-like yoghurt discharge which is normal. However, certain types of discharge can indicate signs of infection such as yellow, green, chunky consistency, or producing foul-smell. Yeast or a bacterial infection usually causes abnormal discharge. There are also a number of sexually transmitted infections, you can read up on these on our website.

***If your vaginal discharge has the symptoms that are stated above, please visit your doctor or gynaecologists.***

## Conditions associated with the menstrual cycle



There are various conditions associated with the menstrual cycle. Every woman is unique and they experience different things during their cycles. Some women get the short end of the stick and as a result, have to deal with some gruesome discomforts and conditions during their cycles. These conditions will be discussed below in detail.

**Dysmenorrhea:** often referred to as period pain characterised by severe and frequent menstrual cramps and pain associated with menstruation. The cause of dysmenorrhea is dependent on if the condition is primary or secondary. With primary dysmenorrhea, women experience abnormal uterine contractions resulting from a chemical imbalance in the body. Secondary dysmenorrhea is caused by other medical conditions, most often endometriosis.

**Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS):** is an unpleasant or uncomfortable symptom during your cycle that may temporarily disturb normal functioning. These symptoms may last from 2 hours to up to 7 days, depending on the duration of your period, and the types and intensity of symptoms can vary in individuals.

**Endometriosis:** is a painful condition in which tissue similar to the tissue that forms the lining of your uterus grows outside of your uterine cavity. The lining of your uterus is called the endometrium. Endometriosis occurs when endometrial tissue grows on your ovaries, bowel, and tissues lining your pelvis. It's unusual for endometrial tissue to spread beyond your pelvic region, but it's not impossible.

**Cervical Dysplasia** is when there are abnormal growths of cells inside and around the

cervix. Although the abnormal growth of cells in and around the cervix does not mean that a person has cancer, if this condition is not treated, it can become cancer. Cervical Dysplasia is spread through sex and is caused by human papillomavirus. This disorder of the reproductive system does not show any symptoms and can only be confirmed by a pap smear.

**Amenorrhea:** is the absence of menstruation, often defined as missing one or more menstrual periods.

- Primary amenorrhea refers to the absence of menstruation in someone who has not had a period by age 15. The most common causes of primary amenorrhea relate to hormone levels, although anatomical problems also can cause amenorrhea.
- Secondary amenorrhea refers to the absence of three or more periods in a row by someone who has had periods in the past. Pregnancy is the most common cause of secondary amenorrhea, although problems with hormones also can cause secondary amenorrhea.

**Gynecologic cancer:** is any cancer that starts in a woman's reproductive organs. Gynecologic cancers begin in different places within a woman's pelvis, which is the area below the stomach and in between the hip bones. Below is a list of types of gynecologic cancers

- Cervical cancer begins in the cervix, which is the lower, narrow end of the uterus.
- Ovarian cancer begins in the ovaries, which are located on each side of the uterus.
- Uterine cancer begins in the uterus, the pear-shaped organ in a woman's pelvis where the baby grows when a woman is pregnant.
- Vaginal cancer begins in the vagina, which is the hollow, tube-like channel between the bottom of the uterus and the outside of the body.
- Vulvar cancer begins in the vulva, the outer part of the female genital organs.

**Polycystic ovary syndrome:** happens when a woman's ovaries or adrenal glands produce more male hormones than normal. One result is that cysts (fluid-filled sacs) develop on the ovaries. Women who are obese are more likely to have PCOS. Women with PCOS are at increased risk of developing diabetes and heart disease. Symptoms may include

- Infertility.
- Pelvic pain.
- Excess hair growth on the face, chest, stomach, thumbs, or toes.
- Baldness or thinning hair.

- Acne, oily skin, or dandruff.
- Patches of thickened dark brown or black skin.

**Interstitial cystitis (IC):** is a chronic bladder condition resulting in recurring discomfort or pain in the bladder or surrounding pelvic region. People with IC usually have inflamed or irritated bladder walls that can cause scarring and stiffening of the bladder. IC can affect anyone; however, it is more common in women than men. Some people have some or none of the following symptoms:

- Abdominal or pelvic mild discomfort.
- Frequent urination.
- A feeling of urgency to urinate.
- Feeling of abdominal or pelvic pressure.
- Tenderness.
- Intense pain in the bladder or pelvic region.
- Severe lower abdominal pain that intensifies as the urinary bladder fills or empties.

**Uterine fibroids:** are the most common noncancerous tumours in women of childbearing age. Fibroids are made of muscle cells and other tissues that grow in and around the wall of the uterus, or womb. The cause of fibroids is unknown. Risk factors include being overweight. The symptoms of fibroids include

- Heavy or painful periods or bleeding between periods.
- Feeling “full” in the lower abdomen.
- Urinating often.
- Pain during sex.
- Lower back pain.
- Reproductive problems, such as infertility, multiple miscarriages, or early labour.

But some women will have no symptoms. That is why it is important to see your health care provider for routine exams.

It is important to realize that while discomfort can be expected in some cases, pain is not normal. If you or loved ones are experiencing pain please visit your physician or gynaecologist.

In a nutshell, no one wishes to have the following conditions dysmenorrhea, premenstrual syndrome, endometriosis, cervical dysplasia, menorrhoea, gynaecological cancer, polycystic ovary syndrome, interstitial cystitis, uterine fibroids. However, they do



occur in young girls and women. If you find yourself facing any symptoms mentioned above visit your nearest doctor or gynaecologists.

## Well Women

We have come to the end of our Well Women Guide on Menstrual Health. Getting to know about your body is not only empowering but it has the ability to improve your life and the lives of the women around you. If you are struggling with anything at all then please do contact your healthcare provider for support.

Remember, there is no shame and no need for fear when it comes to menstrual health. Let's get informed and help educate our community in order to end period poverty and its effects on women across the world.

For more information feel free to visit our [Facebook Page](#), [Instagram](#) pages and [Website](#). If you would like to get in touch with us or to support our work email us at [kunashefoundation@gmail.com](mailto:kunashefoundation@gmail.com)

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View the Well Women Guide online at <https://www.kunashefoundation.org/resources>

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