Period Education
UK

SESSION 1

Menstrual Cycle Essentials

Stuff you'll need!

- Presentation slides
- Post-it notes
- Pens
- Question box
- A space big enough to be active (if you can)
- Access to a screen (optinal)
- Period positive poster (optional)

Aims of session

To develop awareness of what a normal menstrual cycle is
To be able to name different menstrual cycle symptoms
To identify and understand that menstruating people will have different experiences

This session **is the first of four student-centred sessions**. Each session includes active learning activities to support teacher-led components. The following symbols are used throughout the lesson plan to help you navigate:

Pupil Activities
These are only ideas! We have provided options depending on the space and resources you may have available.

Teacher-Led Sections
PowerPoint slides accompany this session plan if needed.

Videos

Notes worth highlighting to the class
These are additional notes that you may want to highlight that are not included in the PowerPoint slides.

Optional Activity
Depending on space and time.

Introduction

There are three main sections to this session:

1. An overview of the menstrual cycle and menstruation
2. What to expect and what's normal for a natural menstrual cycle
3. Menstrual cycle related symptoms

Section 1: An overview of the menstrual cycle and menstruation

To start, explain to your class that this session is focused on menstrual cycle education. You could explain to them that these sessions have been put together by experts in the area and using experiences from and questions asked by young people.
Also explain that when we refer to female (or girls if it's referencing published work) throughout, then we are referring to those that are assigned female at birth.

You can outline the aims of the session above (also on **slide 2**).

Briefly introduce the menstrual cycle (**available on slide 3**), highlighting that many people in the world are menstruators and menstruation is normal and a sign of good health for most menstruators. It also highlights that not all menstruating people are girls/women and not all girls/women menstruate. You may need to explain what this means (see below).

People of all genders can menstruate, including non-binary people, agender people and transgender men. Equally, many people, trans and cis may not have a menstrual cycle because of medication they are on (e.g. hormonal contraceptives), due to menstrual dysfunctions or abnormalities, or because of pregnancy.

If this is an area you feel the class need to discuss further, or have further clarification around, there is a great blog by Clue on this topic: https://helloclue.com/articles/cycle-a-z/talking-about-periods-beyond-gender

Pupil Activity (optional): Why do we ALL need to know about menstruation and the menstrual cycle?

If you have time, starting with the question *'Why do we ALL need to know about menstruation and the menstrual cycle?'* can be a good icebreaker. Use the Period Positive School Environment poster, either printed or displayed on screen (on **slide 4**), for an activity where pupils can discuss or write-down answers (using post-it notes). For collaborative work, divide students into small groups or pairs.

Extension task: pupils may even want to produce their own acronym or poster which highlights the importance of this topic. These could be displayed across the school.

Activity 1: What do you know about the menstrual cycle and menstruation

As there will be different levels of knowledge and experiences in the class, the following activity options will let you gauge the level of understanding within the class.

There are a number of questions on **slide 6.** Pupils can answer these individually, in pairs, or in small groups using post-it notes (or similar). To get students **physically active, divide the classroom into four corners or increase the distance required to place the post-it notes on a wall. You can set a time limit to increase the intensity and make it competitive between groups.** Read out or display the questions (written or using slide 6) for pupils to answer.

Once students have answered the questions, have the answers noted below (**also slides 7-10**) if you would like to show pupils and go over the answers.

Q1. ***What is menstruation (also known as a period)?***
A1. Menstruation is the proper medical term, but it is commonly known as periods. Periods are part of the menstrual cycle where the uterus (found in the lower abdomen) lining sheds and blood and some uterus tissue flows down through the cervix and out of the vagina.

Q2. ***What names have you heard people use when talking about menstruation or periods?***
A2. There is a video (1 min 49 seconds) to support this embedded into **slide 9** but can be found at https://youtu.be/R0QAo-niepk

There are >5,000 different words for periods across the world! You can add that these are euphemisms – a term used to soften a word which is deemed embarrassing and shameful – which have been used in the past because people were ashamed of talking about periods.

Q3. *Why do people have periods?*
Before showing the accompanying **video** on **slide 10** (https://youtu.be/ulaPA-zZ9OI), you could ask pupils to point to where the ovaries and uterus sit within a female body.
A3. When a female goes through puberty, a lot of hormones communicate with each other to start preparing the uterus to reproduce (have a child) in the future.
A period is only one part of the menstrual cycle. This cycle is controlled by different hormones. The main hormones controlling the menstrual cycle are oestrogen and progesterone. They send messages to the reproductive system to release an egg from the ovary (called ovulation).
The hormones also cause the uterus lining to build up just in case fertilisation (pregnancy) occurs. If fertilisation doesn't happen, the uterus doesn't need this thick lining and sheds. This is menstruation/a period.
This process then starts again for the next cycle.

Q4. *What's the difference between menstruation (i.e. periods) and the menstrual cycle?*
A4. A period is only one part of the menstrual cycle where the uterus lining sheds and comes out of the vagina as blood.
A menstrual cycle is the length of time from the start of one period to the start of the next period.
Day 1 of the cycle is the first day of bleeding (known as period, menstruation or menses)

Section 2. What to expect and what's normal for a natural menstrual cycle

Menstruating people often want to know what to expect when menstruation begins and what's normal.

It's important to highlight that the first couple of years will be more variable and it takes time for the menstrual cycle to settle into a rhythm.

Activity 2: What to expect and what's normal

Similar to activity 1, there are a number of questions on **slides 13 and 18** that pupils can answer. There are a number of activity options outlined below.

Speed interviews/speed dating - Pupils form two lines (A and B), standing and facing each other. Provide pupils with one of the questions, partners discuss the answer for a short time (e.g. one minute). Once the time is up, you call "change!". Line A moves one space across, therefore giving each student a new partner. Repeat with the next question. Add in passing a ball or similar for additional activity/skills.

Mix and Mingle – Pupils pair up, standing and facing each other. Provide pupils with one of the questions for partners to discuss for a short time (e.g. one minute). You call "change!" and pupils find another partner. If you have space, increase the distance between pupil pairings to boost physical activity and consider adding in activity tasks before moving e.g. 10 squats. Repeat for the next question.

Conver-stations – Allocate pupils into small groups. Provide pupils with one of the questions and a set time to discuss a given topic (e.g. two minutes). When the time is up, half the members of each group swap with a neighbouring group. They share the findings from their first group's discussion, then move on to the next question. Again add in different activities or skills such as different types of ball passes whilst discussing. The person talking has to be holding the ball etc.

Following the activity, chat through the answers noted below (also **slides 14-22**).

Q1. ***At what age does the menstrual cycle start?***
A1. Most people first start their periods anytime from 8-15 years. The average age is 12 years. If a female has reached their 16th birthday and hasn't started menstruating then advise that they chat with a doctor.

Q2. ***At what age does menstruation stop?***
A2. The average age menstrual cycles stop (menopause) in the UK is aged 51 years, but before then there can be years of irregular cycles (perimenopause).

Some mum's or caregivers may be perimenopausal or menopausal and they may ask what this is like. Perimenopause is the years before menopause. This usually happens in their 40s and is accompanied by changing hormone levels. Menstrual cycles can often change in length, becoming longer and shorter and bleeding may be heavier or lighter. Symptoms such as hot flushes, night sweats (waking in the night sweating), trouble sleeping, anxiety, and vaginal dryness can be experienced. Empathy is also key for people going through perimenopause but treatment can be available from GPs to help with symptoms.

Q3. ***How does someone know when their menstrual cycle will start?***
A3. They won't know for certain. However, periods can start about 2-3 years after breast tissue starts growing (breast budding).

Q4. ***What are the first periods like?***
A4. The first menstrual cycles are varied in length and flow.

The first few periods may be very light and only see a few spots of reddish-brown blood.
It may only last a few days.
The first period tends to be painless.

Q5. What's a normal cycle length? (i.e. from one period to the next)
A5. For the first 2 years after periods start, the cycle may be irregular and typically between 21 and 45 days. The first cycle is usually the longest.
By the third year of having periods, most menstrual cycles are on average 28 days but between 21 and 35 days is normal. In Scotland the NHS Inform guidance states 24 to 38 days is normal.

Reiterate what a normal cycle length is for the first couple of years as most educational resources only state that the menstrual cycle is 28 days. Menstruators are often concerned when their cycles are not 28 days but their cycles are still within the norms.

A regular period is super important for health! If a female consistently has a menstrual cycle shorter than 21 days or more than 35 days (ACOG guidelines, NHS England and Wales); 24 to 38 days (FIGO guidelines NHS inform Scotland), or have had no periods for 3 months or longer (in the absence of pregnancy), they should check with a doctor.

Pupils may want to know why it is good for health. A regular and manageable menstrual cycle should be a sign of good health and that they are needed for:



Healthy bones - Oestrogen and progesterone are needed for bone health. Low oestrogen leads to bone loss and reduced strength, over time this can cause problems (e.g. bone fractures).



Healthy mind - Oestrogen helps to improve mood, motivation and reduces anxiety.



Healthy metabolism - Oestrogen and progesterone help keep a healthy body weight by supporting healthy metabolism

Q6. *How much blood should there be?*

A6. Bleeding is often heavier in the first few days of the period

Using a total of three to six 'regular' pads or tampons per day (or up to 16 fully soaked 'regular pads and tampons throughout the duration of a period) is normal.

Excessive bleeding includes:



Changing period products every 1–2 hour, particularly if bleeding lasts more than 7 days



Needing to use two period products at one time (e.g. pad and tampon)



Frequently leaking through period products



Passing clots the size of 10p coin.

Note that they should seek medical advice if they think they have heavy menstrual bleeding. It may be due to an underlying condition (it also may not). Heavy menstrual bleeding can also result in low iron stores in the body which can leave people feeling fatigued and more out of breath when exercising.

Q7. *What should period blood look like?*



A7. Changes in period blood colour are normal

Dark red, brown, or black period blood is when it has reacted with oxygen and often happens at the start or end of your period as it takes longer to leave the uterus.

Bright red period blood is newer blood and is often around the heavier times of the period.

Spotting is very light bleeding that happens outside of the regular period. Some people experience ovulation (mid-cycle) spotting.

They should talk to their healthcare provider if there is grayish or pink watery discharge

There is a video from a brand called Clue (41 seconds) to support this information which is embedded into **slide 22**. It can also be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6MzSW-8034

Section 3. Menstrual cycle related symptoms

The last core section of this lesson introduces symptoms and different lived-experiences menstruating people have.

The term PMS is often used but can be misleading as it suggests symptoms can only occur before a period. In reality, most symptoms occur in the few days before and the first couple of days of a period and symptoms (good and bad) can occur across the menstrual cycle.

Ensure pupils recognise that the number and severity of symptoms will differ from one person to the next. So, what you, your mother, sister, partner experience may not be what is experienced by others.

Many people suffer in silence and don't get help with their period symptoms. If symptoms don't improve with simple management strategies (**session 3** provides management strategies) and are affecting daily life, then they should seek help from a medical professional.

Activity 3: Symptoms

"What symptoms have you heard about that are due to the menstrual cycle?" (also on slide 25). There are a number of activity options outlined below.

Symptom checker - Ask pupils to write down the symptoms they know and then check these against the symptoms on **slide 27 & 28**. This can be done individually, in pairs or small groups. To make this competitive, pupils could get points for each symptom they have identified.

Card sorting (heard of, not heard, unsure) - print out **Slide 26 and 27** and cut up the different symptoms into 'cards'. Ask pupils to place each symptom into one of three piles: 'I've heard of this', 'I've not heard of this', 'I'm unsure if I've heard of this' make this as active by placing the piles far apart.

Symptom type (physical, psychological/mental/both) – you will need a fairly large space for this activity. Split the room into three, a section for symptoms that affect people physically, a section for symptoms that affect people psychologically/mentally/cognitively and a section where it may affect them both physically and psychologically. Call out a symptom, pupils will walk/run to the section they think that symptom affects most. To make it more physically active, you could ask pupils to complete additional movements for physical symptoms, psychological symptoms or both (e.g. ask students to move to the section and complete 10 squats for physical symptoms, a yoga pose for psychological and a plank for both).

Following this activity, **slide 27 and 28** provides a number of negatively and positively associated menstrual cycle symptoms. Discuss the most commonly known symptoms in the class and those least commonly known. You can discuss symptoms that affect people physically, psychologically/mentally, or both.
Slide 25 highlights that symptom are variable and experiences are different.

Ensure pupils recognise that there are many symptoms and that symptoms on the slides are not an exhaustive list of symptoms – there are approximately 150 known menstrual cycle-related symptoms!

Slide 28 outlines a number of positive symptoms. It is worth reiterating that there are positive experiences as a consequence of the menstrual cycle and knowing how you feel across the menstrual cycle is important.
Pupils may ask about severe symptoms and how they relate to other conditions e.g. endometriosis. There are notes below on some menstrual dysfunctions.

Regular menstrual cycles are important for health. However, for some, there are issues and symptoms where investigation by a medical professional is needed. Having an awareness of potential causes of severe symptoms and menstrual disorders is important in order to seek help. The examples below include:

- **Very heavy bleeding** - There are many causes of very heavy bleeding. But if there is need to change period products every 1–2 hour, use two period products at one time, frequently leak, if bleeding lasts more than 7 days, or if passing clots the size of 10p coins then speak to a medical professional.
- **Dysmenorrhoea** - As noted in the symptoms section, cramps are a very common symptom. However, they should be mild and easily manageable (you can say that there is another lesson on management strategies) and not interfere with daily activities.
- **Endometriosis** - Affects about 10% of menstruating people. Tissue that's similar to the uterus lining starts to grow outside of the uterus. This other tissue will shed when a period begins and can cause extremely painful period pains and other pelvic pain.
- **Polyendocrine metabolic ovarian syndrome (PMOS)** - A condition that leads to hormone imbalances and can cause irregular periods, missing ovulation, acne and weight gain and extra facial or body hair
- **Pre-Menstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD)** - Is a severe form of pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS). Mood symptoms are very pronounced, and can include anxiety, depression, irritability, severe mood swings, difficulty concentrating and fatigue.

Extension activity: menstrual disorders

Ask students to find a social media post or short video from a reputable account/website which explains a bit more about the dysfunctions above and share the posts/videos with the class. This could be done as a homework task and posted on any online classroom-based site (e.g. Google Classroom).

Question Box



Add a question box during and after the lesson so pupils have an anonymous safe space to ask questions or highlight concerns that they may otherwise find embarrassing, uncomfortable or lack the vocabulary to express. Ensure you follow up with the answers and set expectations around timelines. Answering pupil questions could be a good way to start the next lesson in this block.

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