

SESSION 4

Staying Active During PE(riods)!

Stuff you'll need!

- A large hall or space - this is designed to be a PE session
- Access to a screen to watch videos (optional)
- The answers to lesson 3 'What are the general concerns or barriers to participating in PE whilst menstruating?'

Aims of session

- To identify the benefits of exercise on period symptoms
- To identify different physical activity and exercises that have been shown to improve menstrual cycle symptoms
- To identify ways to engage in PE whilst menstruating

This session is the fourth and final student-centred session. Each session includes active learning activities to support teacher-led components, this has been designed to be physically active in PE. 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 lesson plan to help you with supporting information



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 two main sections to this session:

1. Experiences and importance of exercise for the menstrual cycle
2. Concerns, barriers and solutions for PE and menstruation

Section 1. Experiences and importance of exercise for the menstrual cycle



To start, explain to your class that this session is focused on menstrual cycle experiences during exercise, the importance of exercise for the menstrual cycle and menstrual cycle symptom management through physical activity and exercise and outline the aims.

Also explain that when we refer to female (or girls if it's referencing published research) throughout the lessons, then we are referring to those that are assigned female at birth.



Physical Activity 1: Frequently asked questions true or false

TRUE

FALSE

You will need a hall or open space. Set up two areas or stations on opposite sides of the space you have available. One side of the space can be allocated for 'true' responses and the opposite side of the space for 'false' responses.

Below are a number of statements (also on slide 4) which people are often unsure about in relation to exercising whilst having a period. You will call each of the statements out and pupils must run to the true/false station that they think aligns with the statement.

You could consider adding additional activities or equipment such as dribbling a ball whilst moving to either end of the room. Alternatively, once they get to their true or false 'station', have them perform an activity e.g, 10 press ups for true and 10 squats for false. You could change the activity for each question.

Note: we recommend avoiding jumping as many girls report this is most uncomfortable whilst on their period.



The answers and explanations to the statements are below.

1. Exercise and physical activity should be minimised whilst menstruating =

FALSE

Many menstruating people wonder whether it is okay to work out during their period. The answer is yes! There is no evidence to suggest physical activity needs to be limited. In fact, exercise might help menstrual symptoms.

There may also be times during the menstrual cycle that exercise feels easier. We'll discuss this in more depth as the session progresses.

2. Females can swim whilst on their period =

TRUE

Swimming and doing water sports whilst menstruating is absolutely okay. However, appropriate period products such as tampons, menstrual cups or period swimwear are needed.

3. Athletic performance will decline when menstruating and there's nothing that can be done about it =

FALSE

There is little evidence to suggest that athletic performance should be worse at any point within a menstrual cycle. Although some people may feel worse due to their symptoms which results in poorer performance. There are lots of things that can be tried if athletic performance is a little worse, or they feel a little worse - use the management strategies discussed in lesson 3. We will also discuss exercise during periods in more detail in this session.

4. A menstrual pad can be used when exercising = TRUE (except water sports)

TRUE

Yes, generally period products that suit the needs of the individual can be used. The only caveat is that you menstrual pads cannot be used during swimming or some other water sports.

5. Inversion exercises (e.g. downward dog, headstands, handstands) should be avoided whilst menstruating = FALSE

FALSE

There's no scientific evidence that suggests people should abstain from inversion poses whilst on their period.



Answers continued.

6. Females tire more easily during exercise when on their period = FALSE (unless there symptoms make them feel worse)

Again, there is no evidence to suggest people tire more easily during exercise whilst on their period, but it's important to recognise that some people may feel generally more tired so this will depend on the individual and how they might feel. It is also important to note that exercise can make people feel better and increase energy levels.

7. It is normal for periods to stop if a female is training or working out a lot = FALSE

It is never normal for a period to stop occurring (unless the person is pregnant, is breastfeeding, is menopausal or are taking certain hormonal contraception). There is still a misunderstanding that if females are training hard, training a lot, or have increased the amount of exercise they are doing quite quickly then they should expect periods to disappear. Always seek advice from a doctor if this happens.



Briefly outline the benefits of exercise in general, experiences of exercising whilst menstruating along with introducing exercise for symptom relief and the menstrual cycle more generally. Some information to help is on slides 5-9.

Slide 5 provides the worrying statistics that **~45% of girls aged 14-16 years do not meet the minimum physical activity recommendations that are vital for long-term health**. Girls also have lower physical activity levels than boys and once people drop-out of sport, this habit is more difficult to reverse. We need to collectively try and change this!

The mental, physical and social benefits of physical activity, exercise and sport are well-known. Depending on the level of understanding of the class, you could ask the class '**what are the benefits of physical activity, exercise and PE?**'

Slide 6 also highlights that periods are often a barrier to physical activity, exercise and PE.

In one report from the Youth Sport Trust, **39% of girls have stated that having their period stops them taking part in sport, physical activity and PE**.

In another report from Women in Sport, **78% of girls stated that periods were a barrier to exercise**.

The quotes (from our research on pupil experiences at school) outline why this can be the case for females.

Introduce the concept of individual experiences around exercising whilst on a period and during the menstrual cycle (slide 7 & 8 quotes to help). Some people (even elite athletes) struggle, whilst others find it fairly easy to exercise.

Slide 9 highlights that there may be times of the menstrual cycle that exercise actually feels easier e.g. they feel stronger, faster, more coordinated and/or have more energy.

Provide an overview of common experiences across the menstrual cycle. There is currently not enough evidence to suggest certain exercise should be done at a certain time in their cycle. However, there are a few general themes we tend to see.



The video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kkk9tKHHt8k>) may also be useful as an overview of how people can feel across the menstrual cycle. **This video is aimed at athletes and coaches, but applies to all menstruating people.**



It's important for people to be aware that even if they might feel worse for a day or two, there will be other times in the cycle where they feel much better and are able to perform better.

Section 2. Concerns, barriers and solutions for PE and menstruation

The next section goes on to provide exercise, physical activity and stretching solutions for period symptoms and how to engage in PE.



Physical Activity 2: Exercise and PE(riod) concerns and barriers



'What are the general concerns or barriers to participating in PE whilst menstruating?'

In session 3, the question box was used to collate the responses. If you were unable to do this, then you could quickly ask them to note the concerns on post-it notes (or similar) and make a 'barrier wall'. Have pupils at one end of the room/hall and they need to run to the wall to stick the post-it notes up within a certain amount of time (add additional activities/skills to vary the activity). This will allow you to understand the barriers or worries the class face when it comes to participating in PE with a period.

You may have pupils that have not started their period yet, or do not menstruate. Reassure them that if they are female and under 16 years of age then this is okay and completely normal. They can still contribute around the concerns they may have about starting their period or generally what concerns they think menstruating people may have.



Share the top concerns or barriers that girls have about menstruation and PE participation. These are the findings from the Youth Sport Trust in 2022. (refer to slide 13)

State that many of the concerns students have about participating in PE or school sport when menstruating can actually be overcome by exercising or knowing which products might help! Reiterate that exercise can be one of the solutions.

Exercise has been shown to help by decreasing pain, improving mood, energy and confidence (see slide 14 for information to help discuss with pupils)

Provide solutions to leaking by being prepared, but explaining that we all forget, or periods come unexpectedly. Reassure them they can ask you for products and not to be afraid to ask to go to the toilet. It also explains other concerns around being self-conscious and worried others will know they are on their period. Again, reassure them that no one will know they are menstruating, but dark period pants can help.

Slide 16 recaps a slide from session 3 within this context of being prepared and proactive can help overcome concerns and barriers around menstruation and PE participation.



Tracking cycles - Remind them that tracking their cycle and logging symptoms will help them learn about their own menstrual cycle and can also highlight if something is not normal e.g. if their cycle is too short or too long, bleeding occurs for longer than it should, or is excessively heavy. Remind them to track menstrual cycle length, bleeding length, heaviness of bleeding, symptoms (both positive and negative) throughout the cycle, exercise and other factors such as sleep. They can also track exercise and when they feel good and what exercise helps to alleviate symptoms alongside.



Be prepared – Reiterate to pupils that it’s best to have a period products and a change of underwear in their school bag as periods can come unexpectedly. Ensure pupils know they can access freely available products at school and ensure they know where they can find these within your school.

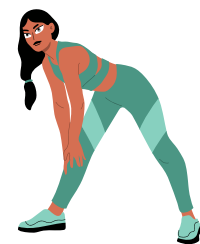
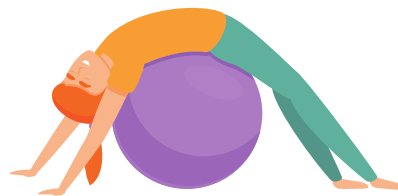


Be proactive - Remind pupils of the various evidence-based lifestyle advice to reduce unwanted symptoms in lesson 3. These include eating a well-balanced diet, good sleep habits, managing stress, heat for abdominal/back pain, being kind to yourself and some medications. There may need to be an element of trial and error to see what works best for each individual.



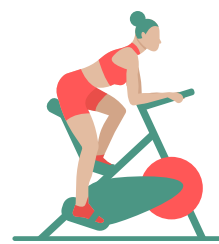
Highlight ways to engage in PE whilst menstruating. Stress that there’s no single best way to exercise during your period. However, scientific studies have shown some activities can be especially beneficial for improving symptoms. These include:

- Gentle exercise and movement such as **yoga, pilates, stretching, walking**



- Moderate intensity (aerobic/cardio) exercise such as **jogging, dancing, swimming, cycling**

You may need to explain that moderate intensity exercise is exercise where you feel out of breath but are still able to talk to someone.



Slide 18 - 21 provides information about different exercise types and modalities that can provide symptom relief, whilst **slide 22** offers additional ways that pupils can participate and engage in PE whilst on their period. Your class may also come up with other ideas.



MAIN FOCUS OF THE LESSON: Physical Activity 2: Plan and execute a symptom reliever physical activity or exercise routine

Provide instructions (refer to slide 23) on how pupils might want to plan and execute an activity to reduce unwanted symptoms. In groups, ask pupils to consider a menstrual related-symptom (e.g. cramps, backache, low mood, tiredness). Request that they plan (the activities, timing of activities and the equipment needed) and then execute a physical activity or exercise routine aimed at helping relieve the symptoms.

For example, they might choose yoga to improve abdominal cramps and backache. They could think, or look up yoga movements and poses that help to stretch the abdominal and lower back muscles (e.g. cobra pose, child's pose, cat pose, reclined twist pose). YouTube has a lot of great free yoga classes and yoga movements if you are able to access it in class. Great yoga videos can be found by [Yoga with Adrienne](#) or we have created a [yoga video](#) to help reduce physical symptoms related to the menstrual cycle. If they have chosen one of these strategies in session 3, ask them to choose another physical activity strategy.



Another example might be a walking, or jogging. If doing this, they could track the number of steps, the speed and distance covered if there is the technology to do this.

Extension options:

Depending on the age and stage of the pupils, you could ask pupils to consider how they might evaluate how they feel pre and post activity. For example, they could consider use ratings or scales to evaluate symptom severity pre and post.

You could ask them how they might adapt this activity for a different symptom.

You could ask them to also consider what aftercare they might need e.g. refueling afterwards or hygiene practices.

You could ask them to produce a reflective journal with tracking of symptoms, alongside exercise and physical activity measurements.

If you have time, you could finish with asking students '**how can PE teachers help you participate and engage with PE when you are menstruating or have menstrual-related symptoms?**'



Make sure you emphasise that pupils shouldn't be embarrassed or afraid to speak to a staff member if they are struggling. Teachers initiating the conversations and normalising the conversations can help open communication.

Also remind them to ask for help if you need to alter the activities they are doing so they can keep active.

Remember the period positive environment section in the Guidance and Help document if you need to refer to this. Key aspects are ensuring there are period products easily available near the PE department and consider your uniform policy. Pupils should be able to wear what is comfortable and ensure they are not afraid of leaks showing e.g. black leggings or shorts.

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