

**Name: Chandanie  
Panday**

**Why menstruation  
matter?**

What do you think of when you hear the words "menstruation" and "periods"? Many persons, even women, may squirm or scoff at this seemingly gross topic and quickly change the subject.

But recently, there has been a much needed change in such attitudes and menstruation is now the subject of discussion for the benefit of both men and women. Menstruation, simply put, is the sloughing of the womb walls. Menstruation or menses forms the first stage in a normal menstrual cycle, the second and third stages being proliferation and secretion respectively. These stages represent monthly changes in the endometrium of the uterus made to accommodate the potential fertilization of a mature ovum by sperm, and thus formation and implantation of a zygote. Under the influence of the hormones estrogen and progesterone, such changes build easily penetrable, vascular tissue equipped with an abundant supply of nutrients for the growing fetus. However, an unfertilized ovum will cause unnecessary endometrial lining to be incompletely stripped away from the uterus, shedding blood and uterine tissue via the vagina as menses and then the cycle repeats itself. Menstruation is naturally experienced in females from puberty (11-16 years old) to menopause (40-50 years old), lasting about five to seven (5-7) days per cycle. The only times when menstruation is normally on hiatus are during pregnancy, lactation and before menarche. Menstruation can also be eliminated or regulated by various methods that manipulate the effect of female hormones. A plethora of misconceptions about the hooks and crooks of menstruation are not uncommon. As such, there is a constant need to remind everyone, but more importantly, growing young ladies, about the critical biological roles of this innate, defining process. This paper seeks to examine this.

Firstly, the presence of menstruation represents the progression of a normal menstrual cycle supported by conventional reproductive anatomical and physiological functions. These point toward fertility, the absence of pregnancy and even protection against endometrial hyperplasia (which may become cancerous), all of which are especially significant to prospective and current parents. The lack of menstruation, i.e. amenorrhea, while being normal during certain situations, may be abnormal for various reasons. Females should therefore seek medical help when the absence of menses

after certain time periods has been noticed even as other typical pubertal changes occur. Even the menstrual blood's color, length and odor are important to note. It is customary to have colors and textures differing from red to brown or black, from thin to very thick. Changes are rarely serious, but certain signs such as a large amount of clots, the presence of gray-tissue-like clumps, or a fishy odor may indicate mischief (such as a miscarriage) and should be investigated. The length of menstruation is variable among women but can be regularized through hormonal therapies like contraception which can be crucial for adolescent girls new to menstruation. Menstrual bleeding can be downscaled by contraception, an important observation for such treated women. Therefore, for menstruation to be managed with pride and dignity, basic and early education on menstruation and its relation to reproductive health is necessary.

Menstruation has implications not only on reproductive health but on general health. Because of blood loss from menstruation, women of childbearing age are at a higher risk for iron-deficiency anemia (IDA). This inherent misfortune must not be ignored as Guyanese women are already affected by IDA of a diet-related etiology. Increases in menstrual flow and timing can lead to significant blood loss over time, without realizing. The manifestations of IDA are amplified when compounded by other IDA risk factors like a poor diet or sickle cell anemia. Moreover, some females may experience menorrhagia (which can result in IDA). Menorrhagia can originate from causes ranging from anovulation in adolescent girls to uterine pathology in older women. Additionally, IDA subsequently results in menstrual problems, including premenstrual syndrome (PMS), and menses that are painful, scanty, absent or late. Consequently, women of child-bearing age should be mindful of signs and symptoms such as pale skin, weakness and fatigue, all suggestive of IDA, as well as features of irregular menses. Women should also be cognizant of the need to maintain a balanced diet, and the importance of supplements like vitamin B12, iron and folic acid. Failure to explore these implications results in substandard performance or missed days by our girls and women in school, work and other activities, thus denying them a basic human right and festering gender inequality. Awareness and accommodation for such women in institutional policies can prevent unnecessary ill health and create a more supportive environment.

The general notion is that menses is an unclean, shameful occurrence. How can women take care of themselves if they are ashamed to talk about an "unclean" process? This is where menstrual hygiene and stigma becomes important. In a developing country such as Guyana, sanitary pads may be costly or unavailable, especially in hinterland villages, and females may exploit contaminated cloth, newspaper or even leaves as substitutes. Some institutions are devoid of safe, clean, or

private washrooms and the necessary toiletries. Additionally, women are subjected to physical and psychological abuse by both men and women for having a healthy bodily function. Various beliefs of impurity, uncleanness, etc. bar women from taking care and from exploring their fullest potential during everyday activities. These economic and social factors blended with the inbred embarrassment of menses are barriers to menstrual hygiene and must be stamped out since they present the risk of reproductive tract infections, infertility, and incompetence. Proper care starts with a conversation, and can only be beneficial.

Menstruation matters to our health, education, economy and social wellbeing. To be a progressive society that supports our females in all regards, menstruation must not be ignored, but rather, embraced. Breaking the taboos and promotion of sexual and reproductive health begins with ourselves and the family, and must extend into the greater parts of the community. A day where people are au fait with and embrace the empowering phenomenon of menstruation will be met by fueling this discussion.