



# Period Stuff

## A guide for Parents

*This booklet is designed to help parents/guardians assist their daughter through this new, exciting and sometimes uncertain time of their lives.*

*It includes some ideas for helping her gather a collection of menstrual products to use, and some ways in which you might like to celebrate this milestone in her life.*

## So, your little girl is growing up!

Getting your first period can be an exciting, upsetting, confusing and embarrassing time. For both your daughter and yourself! Sometimes it's tricky knowing when to start talking about periods and what to say. Hopefully this booklet will help.

How those around her react to this information will help shape how she herself feels about menstruating – so getting off on the right foot can be crucial in helping her deal with her periods through her life.

She will be menstruating for many years to come – so having her see it as a normal bodily process, and not “a curse” can be important for her quality of life.

Too many girls come into menstruation with their mother giving them a “here are the pads, don't let your father know” talk, which sets up that secrecy and periods being a nuisance type attitude. Throwing a party and celebrating it as the best thing to happen in your life may not be the right way to go about it either – but perhaps something in the middle.

Acknowledge it as an important stage of her development, acknowledge that it does mean that she will have to make some changes in her life every month to accommodate it. But also acknowledge that it is perfectly normal and doesn't have to be terrible or embarrassing.

The fact you're reading this booklet is probably a sign that you already have a more positive approach to menstruation than many others do – which is great!

This booklet can give you some things to think about, to try and talk about menstruation and even celebrate this important milestone in her life. It also gives a few tips for getting together some menstrual products to start her out.

Good luck :)

## **Start Young (If it's not too late!)**

If you are reading this because your daughter is at the age of starting her period then this section is too late, but I think it is important to start the discussion on periods and the body from an early age if you can. This helps prepare your daughter so that growing up is less confusing and less scary.

My personal opinion is that it is important to always treat matters of the human body and its processes in a very matter of fact and honest way. I feel that hiding behind pet names for things ("front bottom" instead of vulva for example) encourages feelings of embarrassment and shame. I would also encourage you to use the proper terms for vagina and vulva, as it is very common (and incorrect) for women to refer to their whole genital area as the "vagina" when they really mean vulva or labia. We don't call a nose or finger by an incorrect term or give it a different name, so genitals really should be no different.

I also feel it is important to include boys in the discussions too - because they need to understand about the process and they need to know it is normal and natural too, because they will grow up to experience living with a woman who has periods, and if they find it dirty/gross and don't know much about it, then that that will impact negatively on their lives and the lives of the women too. I've heard from many women whose partners don't even want to hear the word period, would never buy them pads/tampons from the store and so on. If boys are brought up not being scared/disgusted by periods, they will be more supportive partners.

If you have young children, you're likely to rarely go to the toilet alone! so it's likely at some point your children will see your menstrual products, they may even see some blood in the toilet or on the toilet paper. This is a good opportunity to start the discussion on the fact women have periods. Depending on the age of the child you can keep it very simple. They will learn to react to it based on how you react to it. So if you are embarrassed and avoid questions, they will learn that this process is something embarrassing and awkward.

For young children, you can start by explaining that just like wee and poo comes out of your body, grown up ladies also have blood that comes out once a month. That you need to use pads (or another product) to collect, much like how babies wear nappies/diapers.

If they ask why the blood is there or how it gets in there, you can decide what age appropriate explanation to give. Perhaps starting with something along the lines of that ladies can grow babies in their tummies, but when you are not going to have a baby yet, the blood comes out instead.

Some mothers tell their children they are wearing special nappies. Don't be afraid to use the term "pads" and introduce them to the idea early.

As the children get older, you can give more information. You can explain how babies are formed and the function of the blood forming in the womb. If you're uncomfortable at first explaining how the egg gets fertilised, you can try skimming over that part until you need to.

A simple explanation might be along the lines of that women have tiny eggs in their ovaries that travel down into the uterus, where they either pass out of the body along with the blood in a period, or the blood forms a sort of soft bed for the egg to rest in while it grows up to become a baby.

If they ask questions, try to answer them as open and honestly as you can.

At some point, as uncomfortable as it might be, you will have to broach the subject of sex. It is always hard to know how much information is appropriate at what age level, and I'm afraid I really can't give any advice there.

One thing to consider with discussions on sex is also mentioning what is and isn't appropriate behaviour to engage in with others, and what to do if someone puts pressure on them to do something they don't want to do, or does something they feel is wrong. It's unfortunate that we have to consider discussions like that, but it is necessary.

## Plan ahead

As your daughter gets to the age of about 9, you should have a talk about periods if you haven't done it before then. To make sure she is aware of what will happen, before it happens. It is possible for a period to start from about age 9-15. Although it is likely to be around age 12.

Explain what periods are, what they are for (a good time for the “birds and bees” talk if you’ve not done it already!), and how to manage them. Talk about what is normal and what is not.

If you don’t get the chance to talk to her before her period starts, she’ll one day find her period has started and not know what it is or what to do. That can be very frightening for girls to go through. By talking to her about it early, you are also setting up a relationship where she can come to ask you for advice or questions.

It is very important that she knows what will happen, so she knows what to look for and knows what to expect (eg if you're feeling a bit crampy and moist down there, it may be your period starting!). It is also important that she knows where to find where you keep pads at home, and most importantly, has a couple in her school bag. So that she does not panic when the time comes, and isn’t left unprepared if her period starts when she is at school.

There are books available on puberty and menstruation – aimed at giving to girls to educate them. These might be an additional help for you to give her if she has any questions. But talking to her yourself, or having a trusted female relative or close friend, is probably the best option. Just being handed a book to read, can give your daughter the impression that you are not open to talking about things, or are too embarrassed to discuss these things, which may mean she’s too scared to come to you if she has any questions.

You should also aim to have already prepared a collection of menstrual products especially for her. Smaller “funkier” pads and products, so that she can feel they are hers, rather than ones borrowed from mum. A guide on buying some suitable menstrual products is found later in this booklet.

## Approach it positively

It is very important to convey a positive attitude. Much of the way your daughter views menstruation will come from the influence of those around her. If she is taught that menstruation is a “curse”, and something horrible, that is how it will likely be for her. Likewise, it is important that it not be treated as a secret, shameful thing to be hidden away. Much of the embarrassment women feel around their period, and the fact they can’t often talk openly about it, comes from the fact society keeps menstruation hidden.

Your daughter might already feel embarrassed, uncomfortable and want to keep it a secret from everyone, however it is important for her to know that she need not feel that way. It’s beneficial for all of society if menstruation is spoken about more openly and not hidden away to be embarrassed about. Don’t force her to talk about it, and respect any shyness she has, but encourage her to be open, and work on overcoming embarrassment.

That is not to say that she should run around telling everyone or take out newspaper ads! but while menstruation is kept as something hidden, it will always have negative emotions added to it. This isn’t something we should want for our daughters and our daughter’s daughters (and so on).

Being discreet is good, just like we don’t need to discuss the intimate details of our bowel habits or show people the contents of a used handkerchief - it’s good to keep some things a bit private! But being secretive and embarrassed about menstruation doesn’t show that it is a normal, healthy part of life.

Even in regard to talking to men about it. Many men seem very squeamish about the topic, but that is only because it is not something they are commonly involve in talking about – they are sheltered from it growing up, and as a result, they take into adulthood all the lack of knowledge, perhaps even fear. So the standard response is to treat it as something “gross” and something they don’t want to know anything about. Men should definitely be included in more discussions on menstruation, to make it more “normal”.

## **Tell her of your experiences**

Mums, Aunts and other trusted female relatives can sit down and have an open and honest chat about some of their experiences. Tell her how you felt about your first period, how you handled it. What products you used to use.

You'll probably find your experiences will be very different to hers, and not all your experiences might be positive ones. But by talking together about it, you are showing that you are there for her, and you are able to have discussions of this personal nature – which can help her to feel more secure in coming to you to ask questions and talk about things when she needs to.

Make sure she knows that she can come to talk to you, if she has any concerns about her period. If she thinks it might be too heavy, if she skips a month, if she has cramps, soreness, itchyiness or other things. Being able to talk to you or a Dr, can help catch problems early on, and can help reduce her stress if she's worrying about something and too afraid to mention it.

Talking about things like thrush, cystitis/UTI and discharge is also important. They will likely affect her at some point in her life, and if she knows what they are and what to do about them, it can stop her worrying about it and save her from a lot of embarrassed discomfort.

## **Do something to celebrate**

Be guided by what she wants to do, as she might feel embarrassed and not want to celebrate or do anything that involves other people, but there are many ways you can together celebrate this milestone in her life.

While she might be reluctant to do anything special, if you can try to do something, this will give her something positive to look back on. You can never re-celebrate your first period, so if you can celebrate it, why not!

Some ideas for celebrating are found later in this booklet.

## Teasing

As we all know, there can be a lot of teasing that happens at school, and unfortunately some teasing can happen around periods. Even just the idea of someone having a period, not only if someone has a leak or obvious problem.

Not only from boys – who think it's gross and funny, and will probably tease any girls they know are having a period. But other girls can often tease – probably because of their own insecurities and embarrassment about them.

One of the best ways to combat most teasing is to be confident and not show the teaser that you are being affected by what they say. This is another important reason for girls to have a more positive outlook on menstruation.

It doesn't seem to make sense, but sometimes other girls will see someone carrying a pad into the toilet, and will make some comment, like “Eww, Jenny's got her period”. As if it's something she should be ashamed of. Which of course is likely to make poor Jenny feel self-conscious and ashamed of what is just a normal, natural body process.

If girls have the self-confidence to just reply with a “yes, so what – big deal” type thing, laugh it off, and turn the embarrassment onto the teaser, for pointing out they said something stupid. That can help avoid some of the worries girls have about managing their periods at school.

To help avoid potential issues like this, talk about ways she can deal with her periods at school, camp, excursions etc. in the most discreet ways. Help her work out what products would be best to use in these situations, how she can carry them around with her discretely, and how to dispose of them. Also discuss what to say if people do make comments about her having a period. So that she has some comebacks and will feel stronger confronting any teasing.

Hopefully teasing won't be an issue, but if you can prepare for it, it can help.

## **Mood Swings**

Remember that puberty is an emotional time, and with the changing hormones that are growing her from a girl into a woman, these hormones can cause mood swings and a lot of emotions. You will likely go from fantastic parents to evil prison guards in the blink of an eye 😊 Try to support her and understand her changing moods.

If you can, take your cues off her as to how to act around her. Sometimes you might do better being more of a friend than a parent, sometimes she might need that parental comfort and support. It will be natural for her to have ever changing views on things. One day she might find her height to be fine, the next it might be something that has her in tears. Friendships between other girls going through puberty as well, can become strained. Girls are notorious for having fights and can be quite cruel.

Try to encourage her to talk to you about the emotional issues she is having, and try not to dismiss something that seems terribly trivial to you. She will probably realise in hindsight that some of her concerns were silly in comparison to other issues, but at the time they will seem very real and very large. So if you can support her through those, and not dismiss them, it can give her the confidence to talk more to you about things that trouble her, which will help her through this.

While it might sound helpful to say “you’ll realise in a year or so, that this doesn’t matter” – that is probably not going to be helpful for her now. It will be hard for her to see how things might improve, when it seems helpless now.

## **Hygiene**

Explain how best to wash herself when she has a period. She may also need to start wearing deodorant around this time too. If you would like her to use certain towels, or if you have any certain ways to do things, explain that. Tell her what to do if she gets blood on the towels or her clothing or bedding.

## Creating a period supply kit

As mentioned earlier, it's a good idea to get together a collection of supplies for your daughter, so she has her own products to use when the time comes.

You won't know what her period will be like until it happens, but it is likely to start off light and get heavier as it settles down. If there is a family history of heavy periods, she could start out with a heavy period. So it's a good idea to include products to cover all types of flow, just to be sure. Include some pantyliners, some regular pads, some heavy pads and some overnight pads. With tampons or menstrual cup if you're ok with internal products being used.

You might want to put this kit in a pretty box for her. Even if you're going to use all reusable products, it's a good idea to have a few disposables on hand, and in her schoolbag. Not only just for her, but if she has friends over, it's not advisable to share reusable products with friends, so keeping some disposable pads on hand can mean her friends can use them in emergencies.

**Tampons** — Tampons come in different sizes and in applicator and non-applicator varieties. Smaller tampons, and those advertised as being smoother would probably be the best choice for a younger and inexperienced user. Applicator tampons might be easier for her to use, but they are less common to find and take up more space, so the non-applicator ones would probably be more convenient in the long run. You may want to encourage tampons only be used for swimming.

**Pantyliners** — Because pantyliners are smaller, and suitable for spotting or light flow, these can be good for girls starting their periods. It should be explained to her though that pantyliners are usually not as absorbent as a pad, so even if they are the right size, they might not be suitable for her whole period. If disposable pantyliners are being used, you can always test the absorbency of them by pouring some water into one, and see how much it will absorb — this could give you an idea of how suitable they would be.

**Disposable Pads** – These usually come in 2 basic lengths, regular and night. She might find she needs night pads overnight, or the regular ones might be long enough. It's best to try night pads and then go down a size if that extra length is not needed, than to try shorter pads and have leaks overnight. "Ultrathin" brands may be more comfortable for her, and look less imposing.

While the fancier brands of pad are more expensive than the generic ones, when you're creating her first product kit, it's nice to spend the extra money and get those fancier pads as they will look a bit more special and less like "surfboards".

**Cloth pads** - If choosing reusable cloth pads, you can shop for whatever lengths suit her body size/shape. A good way to work out what sizes would be best, is if she has already used a few disposable pads, and can work out from the length of those, if they are too long, too wide, not long enough etc. Otherwise, get a tape measure and work out how long you think she'd need. (You can measure her underwear if you wanted to make a secret stash)

If she finds she bleeds more out the front or back, you can look for pads that have one end longer than the other. This will allow her to wear that longer end at the front where she needs more coverage. It's a good idea to start with just a few pads in different lengths or types, and when she's had a chance to try them out, you can buy more of the ones she likes. Buying or making some cloth pads together, where she can choose the fabrics, can be a great bonding exercise as well as getting pads she will like.

**Menstrual Cups** - Menstrual cups are a safer alternative to tampons, as they don't have the TSS risks tampons do, they are also less damaging to the vaginal wall, can be worn longer, hold more and can be more comfortable. Most brands of menstrual cup include a small size. Some brands (such as Lunette, Ladycup and MeLuna) are smaller than other brands – so check the sizing. They can come coloured too, making them a little more "fun".

## Testing out the products

Show her how to use the menstrual products you've got for her. So that she can be comfortable and familiar with their use.

Tampons should not be used when she doesn't have a period, as they will be too dry to insert and remove, which can cause discomfort and cause damage. However you can take one out of the pack and explain how it works. You can use your closed hand as an example vagina to show her how tampons are used. It's a good time to remind her that it's not a good idea to flush tampons down the toilet as they could cause blockages in the plumbing, and to have a discussion on TSS risks.

Disposable pads are fairly simple and easy to work out how to put on, but for the sake of "wasting" a pad to show her, you may as well get one out and demonstrate how they work. Explain how some have wings and some don't. Show her how you wrap them up to dispose of them, and where to put them.

Reusable cloth pads are likewise pretty obvious in how they work, but you might need to explain that a wider section goes to the back, how a double snap setting works, or which way up the pads are to be worn. You can also then talk about how the pads are to be washed and cared for.

Menstrual cups can likewise be demonstrated by forming your hand into an example "vagina", and you can show her the various folds. Because you can wear a menstrual cup when you don't have your period, she can practice before her period starts, which can help her to have mastered the cup before she would need to use it, and practicing when there is no blood can be more convenient. Using lubricant on the cup can help insertion, and some menstrual cup brands sell packets of lubricant for this purpose (waterbased lubricant)

## Celebrating

In many cultures, they celebrate the coming of womanhood that is marked by the first menstruation.

There are many ways you could celebrate this special occasion – going all out, or just doing something small. It's completely up to you and your daughter. Be lead by what she would like do, perhaps offering suggestions and see which ones she seems interested by.

**Special Calendar** - You could start by buying her a calendar or diary of her own to use to mark down her period dates and make any notes about cramps/cravings/mood swings. There is a lovely “Moon Diary” and wall chart ([www.moondiary.com.au](http://www.moondiary.com.au)) that would make a lovely gift.

**Jewellery & Flowers** – A gift, maybe suitable for a father to give to their daughter, might be a piece of red jewellery and/or some red flowers or single rose. A symbol of growing up as well as an acknowledgment of the event.

**Go out to Dinner** – A special dinner in a fancy restaurant or café for the whole family or just the mother and daughter.

**Pampering** – Perhaps a trip to a beauty salon to have a manicure or her hair done. This could be part of a shopping trip where she can buy some new clothes and/or jewellery.

**Ear Piercing** – If she doesn't already have her ears pierced, this could be a good milestone to have them done if she wishes.

## Period Party / Red Party / Menarche Celebration

If you'd like to have a special party to celebrate, here are some ideas.

Invite the females closest to your daughter (let her pick the guests). Those who are past menopause usually wear black, those menstruating wear red and those not yet menstruating wear white – this represents the “Maiden, Mother and Crone” aspects of womanhood. Your daughter may like to wear a new red dress for the occasion, with flowers in her hair or a crown of flowers may be presented to her during the ceremony.

If you have enough guests, have the women who have menstruated stand in a circle and perform any ceremony you have inside this circle. This is the Circle of Womanhood, and your daughter is welcomed into this with the ceremony. With any males and not-yet-menstruating girls may stand around the outside of the circle, as observers but not part of the Woman's Circle.

When welcoming your daughter into the circle, often it is done by having the women hold hands and form an arch to walk through to enter the circle.

You could have a red cloth in the centre of the circle, with objects and symbols of womanhood placed upon it. Perhaps the guests could each bring something to place here. Pictures/statues of ancient feminine forms, cowrie shells etc. This represents the power of a woman.

As part of the ceremony, you could have your daughter bring with her a symbol of her childhood (a toy), which she is asked to leave behind to symbolise moving into womanhood. Which can then be presented back to her, saying that while she is becoming a woman, she can still embrace her inner child.

You could have a representation of the 4 elements of nature, to symbolise the bestowing of those energies to all present. Air (yellow, feathers/incense) represents thoughts, ideas and wisdom. Fire (red, flame/candles) passion and sensuality. Water (blue, water/shells) dreams, visions and intuition. Earth (brown, dirt/flowers/leaves) body, nourishment and fertility.

To include the elements in the ceremony, you can touch her with a feather or have someone fan her, saying “May the air fill your sails and send you soaring”. Hold a lit candle and walk around her, saying “May the fire not scorch you but make you strong.” Sprinkle water on her, or have her stand in a dish of water, saying “May the water of life flow freely and gently for you”. Sprinkle flowers or dirt on her, or have her stand in a dish of earth, saying “May the Earth be a place of joy for you”.

You can give her a taste of honey, saying "Growing up brings with it the sweetness of life". Then a taste of salt, saying "And also bitterness of life. As you mature I know you will learn to handle both." Then a strawberry or other food of nature, say "May you never hunger". Then a drink, saying "May you never thirst."

Guests can be asked to bring small gifts to give her. Practical items like cloth pads, perfumes, lotions etc. or pieces of jewellery, inspirational poems etc.

After the ceremony, have a feast – you may like to include all your daughter’s favourite foods, or you might like to stick with a red theme.

Include a sharing time – where women can share stories of menstruation and growing up. Both good and bad stories can be shared.

You could set up a special seat (“throne”) for your daughter to sit on, and have her hands and feet massaged, and her hair brushed/played with during the ceremony as a bit of special pampering.

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