

# Menstrual Hygiene

Reading Material for ASHA





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# I. Background

## Why a programme on Menstrual Hygiene?

Good menstrual hygiene is essential for the health and dignity of girls and women. Discussions on menstrual hygiene are important for adolescent girls to clarify existing myths and misconceptions around menstruation. Improving menstrual hygiene is important from the point of view of personal comfort and increased mobility. It also reduces the likelihood of infections resulting from poor hygiene practices during menstruation. Providing girls with knowledge and skills on maintaining menstrual hygiene improves school attendance among girls, who otherwise may not attend school during those days or even drop out of school altogether.

## How to promote Menstrual Hygiene?

Promoting menstrual hygiene is achieved through:

- Provision of health education to girls and women on menstruation and menstrual hygiene
- Increasing community action to improve access to clean toilets with water, both at home and in schools
- Promoting the availability and use of sanitary products
- Enabling safe disposal of sanitary products

## Who can promote Menstrual Hygiene?

Menstrual Hygiene can be promoted in the community and in schools. It is best to start with adolescent girls; although, other women in the reproductive age group would also benefit from the information and access to sanitary products. ASHA, the Anganwadi Workers (AWWs), and the members of women's Self Help Groups (SHGs) can make a substantial difference to menstrual hygiene practices in the community.

As an ASHA, you already have the advantage of being in close contact with women in the community. This will be helpful in providing information on menstrual hygiene and sanitary products contained in this booklet to adolescent girls and women in the community. As a member of the Village Health and Sanitation Committee (VHSC) and in working with members of the Panchayat, you can promote toilets in homes, and ensure separate toilets for girls in local schools. Members of women's SHGs can support and assist you in encouraging menstrual hygiene and promoting the use of sanitary napkins in the community. Sanitary napkins can be made locally by SHGs using a simple technology. You can encourage the groups in your village to take

up this activity. Further information is available in the offices of the District Health Society and the District Collector.

## II. Objectives of the Training

**At the end of the training you will learn the following:**

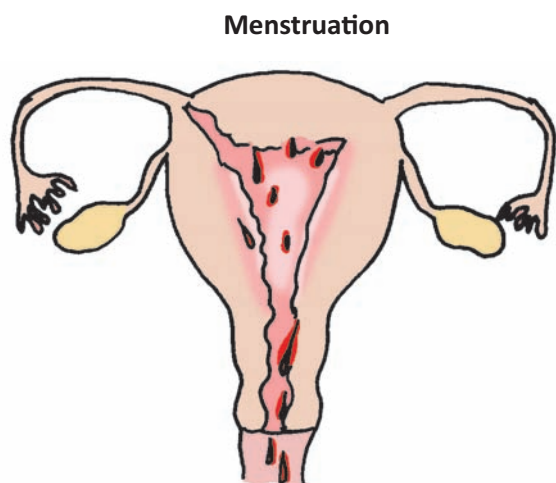
- The basic elements of menstruation and menstrual hygiene
- Proper use and safe disposal of sanitary napkins
- How to communicate the benefits of sanitary napkins and motivate girls in the use of sanitary napkins
- Ensuring a regular supply of sanitary napkins in your community
- Recording and reporting the uptake of sanitary napkins

## III. About Menstruation

### Understanding Menstruation and Problems during menstruation

**Menarche:** The onset of puberty, when the girl has her first period is known as Menarche. Menarche may take place between 9-16 years of age. During this period, most girls observe bleeding for the first time from the vagina. This bleeding becomes a periodic occurrence in a girl's life with the cycle of bleeding observed in a gap of 28-40 days.

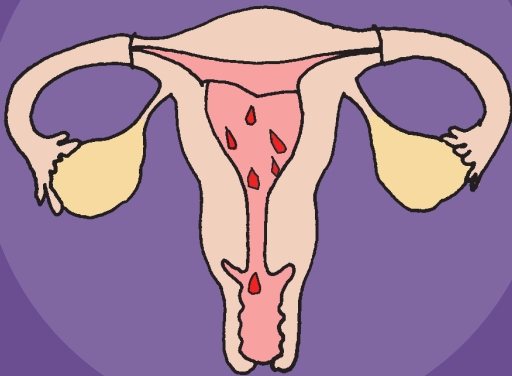
#### Why does menstruation occur?



Girls have thousands of eggs in their ovaries when they are born. Every month, or about once in 21-40 days, one of the eggs leaves one of the ovaries, and travels through a fallopian tube. When the egg leaves the ovary, this is called ovulation. As the egg travels in the fallopian tube, a soft spongy lining gets formed within the uterus. This lining is mostly made of tiny blood vessels. In case an egg and sperm meet to form an embryo, or a baby, that begins to grow in the uterus and the lining will provide the nutrition. If the egg is not joined by a sperm, the lining of the uterus begins to break. The blood that is released from the broken lining, flows out of the vagina. This bleeding is the menstrual period. This whole cycle is called menstruation.

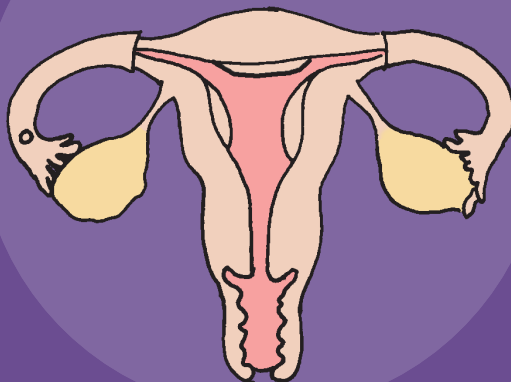
A menstrual cycle lasts from the first day of one period to the first day of the next. The typical cycle of an adult female is 28 days, although some are as short as 22 days and as long as 45 days. Periods usually last about 3-7 days, which can vary too. During a period, a woman passes about 2-4 tablespoons (30-59 millilitres) of menstrual blood.

Days 1-7



The period is considered the beginning of the menstrual cycle. A period normally lasts for around five days, but can be as short as two days or as long as seven. There is usually around 2-6 tablespoons of blood lost during each period, depending on the heaviness of the flow. A period occurs because the uterus will shed its lining if an egg (ovum) is not fertilised.

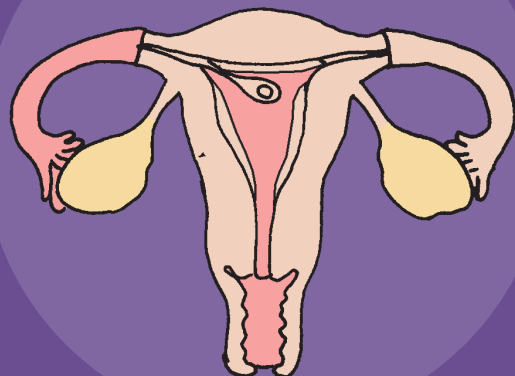
Days 8-14



One of the ovaries releases an egg and the uterus begins to rebuild its lining. Only one egg is released in each cycle. The egg slowly travels down the fallopian tube from the ovaries towards the uterus. If the egg is fertilised by a sperm before it arrives the uterus, the girl becomes pregnant.

If the egg is not fertilised, the uterus wall continues to thicken until there is a sudden drop in hormone levels. The lining breaks down, and the next period begins.

Days 15-28





## IV. What are the Problems that a Girl may Encounter During Menstruation?

The difficulties that girls may experience during menstruation are:

1. Irregular periods
2. Heavy periods
3. Painful periods

**Irregular Periods:** For the first few years of menstruation, cycles are often irregular. They may be shorter (3 weeks) or longer (6 weeks). A young girl may even have only three or four periods a year. A girl's cycles will usually become regular within two to three years after menarche.

**Heavy periods:** A heavy period is one which lasts longer than eight days, saturates the napkin within an hour or includes large clots of blood in the menstrual flow. This is common in adolescents because of slight imbalance in chemical hormones secreted by the body. However, if this happens regularly, it leaves the girl feeling exhausted; which means that the body is losing more blood than it is producing. The girl should then consult a doctor immediately.

**Painful period:** Slight pain during periods is quite normal. This is due to the secretions of a chemical called prostaglandins in larger quantity than normal. This leads to nausea, headaches, diarrhoea and severe cramps. Usually, this lasts only for a day or two. To get relief from these symptoms, a girl should try the following methods:

- Fill a plastic bottle with hot water, wrap it in a towel and place it on the abdomen,
- Massage the abdomen
- Local remedies such as ginger tea can be taken

**Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS):** This refers to a combination of physical and emotional symptoms experienced by all women during the menstrual cycle, usually just before bleeding begins. These symptoms include:

- a. Temporary weight gain and a feeling of heaviness due to accumulation of water in the body





b. Headaches and cramps

c. Painful or heavy feeling in the breasts

d. Feelings of irritability



These symptoms begin five to seven days before the period starts and disappear before the bleeding begins. This can be managed with remedies for pain described above and eating a diet that is low in salt, and includes foods like leafy green vegetable and raw fruits and vegetables, which are low in sugar and high in fibre.

## Key Messages

- Menstruation is part of every woman's life and there should be no shame or embarrassment around this.
- There is no impurity or pollution associated with menstruation.
- Menstruation should not be seen as an obstacle to daily activities
- Practices such as seclusion or staying away from school must be discouraged.

## V. Menstrual Hygiene, Use and Disposal of Sanitary Napkins

What is commonly used by girls and women to absorb menstrual blood?

Girls and women use different ways to absorb menstrual blood. One of the most common methods used is a cloth which is folded and placed within the underwear, or passes over the private parts by means of a string tied around the waist. This cloth is washed and reused most of the time.



Often the cloth is not washed properly, without soap and using very little water. Many girls are embarrassed about drying the cloth under the sun (where it can be seen by others). Therefore, the cloth stays damp and this can give rise to skin infections.

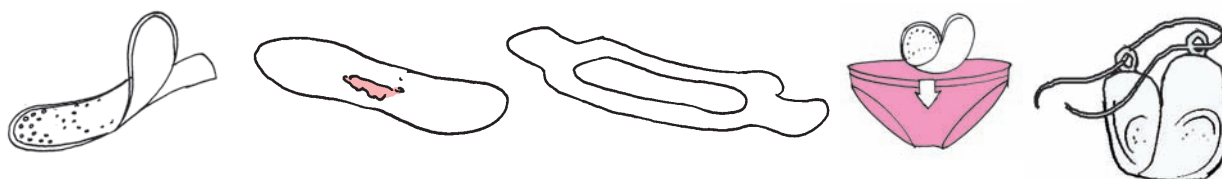
## What is a sanitary napkin?



A sanitary napkin is a pad that is worn during menstruation to absorb the flow of blood. The sanitary napkin is to be used by the girl during her periods (when the blood is flowing) so that it can help her carry out normal work without any discomfort. Sanitary napkins are disposable and should be discarded after being used once. You can obtain a stock of sanitary napkins and store it for distribution to girls.

The sanitary napkin has three layers:

- The lowest layer that lies on the underwear.
- The middle layer which soaks the blood quickly and prevents leakage.
- A surface layer that is close to the skin. It is made of perforated material that keeps the skin dry and acts as a barrier between the skin and the absorbent panel.



There are two types of napkins:

- Sanitary napkin with an adhesive (sticky) strip: This napkin has a strip of paper on its lowest layer which can be peeled off, and the pad can then be stuck to the underwear.
- Non adhesive sanitary napkin used with or without an underwear: These napkin have a special elastic belt or a waist girdle with loops. The pad has an external bag-like covering with long flaps that can slide into the loops.

## What are the advantages of sanitary napkins?

- Disposable sanitary napkins are more convenient and easier to use than reusable cloth.
- Since the blood gets absorbed into the middle layer, there is a feeling of dryness.
- When changed often, they can prevent infection.
- They can be used by women of all age groups.
- They allow girls more mobility and thus can allow them to take part in school activities.

## Things to remember about menstrual hygiene

- Once wet, the napkin should be changed immediately. If not it can cause irritation on the inside of the thighs and can lead to infections.
- Sanitary napkins should be kept in a clean and dry place.
- It is essential to wash the body and private parts daily.
- During menstruation, the outer genitals should be washed from time-to-time to remove any blood that is left. Girls should wash their hands every time they change the napkin.
- If the underwear is soiled, it must be changed. Otherwise this makes bacteria to grow and cause infection.
- If sanitary napkins are not available, a clean cloth pad should be used.

## What should you do if sanitary napkins are not available immediately?

Although a sanitary napkin is a convenient and safe method for maintaining menstrual hygiene, it is possible that one may not be able to get the sanitary napkin in time. In such circumstances, a cloth pad can be used as a substitute. Many women use a cloth pad wrapped in cotton or folded cloth, which is held by a string between the legs.

Points to remember when using a cloth pad:

1. Use clean cotton cloth for making the cloth pads. Pads made of synthetic fibre will not absorb the menstrual fluid and cause irritation and itching.
2. The cloth should be changed 3-4 times during the day, in case of a heavy menstrual flow.
3. The used cloth should be washed separately with hot water and soap and dried in the sun.
4. If the cloth has to be used again, it must be stored in a dry place.



## How to dispose of sanitary napkins?

Safe disposal of sanitary napkins is important. Where there are facilities for regular garbage removal, girls should be encouraged to wrap the used napkin in an old newspaper and throw them into dustbins which are emptied daily. If garbage is not collected daily, the napkins should be disposed of by burying them in a deep pit or by burning them. Some schools have machines in which a large quantity of napkins can be burnt. These are called incinerators. However, not all schools have these. Girls should be cautioned against throwing away used napkins under bushes or out in the open. Sanitary napkins, if collected in one place for a long time, begin to emit bad odour, and become a site where bacteria can multiply. They can also block drains and cause problems with sanitation.



## Planning for menstrual periods

Once menarche sets in, girls should be encouraged to plan for their menstrual periods. This includes keeping track of their menstrual cycles so that they are prepared for the time when the bleeding starts. As periods may be irregular in the early years, girls should be encouraged to be alert for the bleeding. If they are school going girls or plan to be out of home for a long while, they should carry a sanitary napkin with them.

## VI. Key Activities to Promote Menstrual Hygiene

- (i) **Organising monthly meetings on a fixed day for adolescent girls:** One of your responsibilities is to organise monthly meetings on a fixed day at the Anganwadi Centre or Panchayat Bhavan for adolescent girls in the target age group of 10-19 years. The day will be fixed by the state government and will be observed throughout the state. The purpose of this



meeting is to provide health education to girls on issues of menstruation and menstrual hygiene. You should use the flip book provided to you to conduct this session. The second purpose of this meeting is to make sanitary napkins available to the girls. This can be done through the support of the Anganwadi worker and other members of the women self help groups in the village. The meeting should be held in collaboration with the Kishori Samooch or an Adolescent Resource Centre under the SABLA scheme, where it exists. For this, you will be paid an incentive of Rs. 50. These meetings will also serve as venues where information on adolescent-related health can be communicated.

- (ii) **Conducting home visits for girls who do not regularly attend monthly meetings:** Monthly meetings should be complemented by household visits to promote menstrual hygiene among girls and other influencers in the family, who are unable to attend the monthly meetings. This would motivate attendance for future meetings.



- (iii) **Using the venue of Village Health and Nutrition**

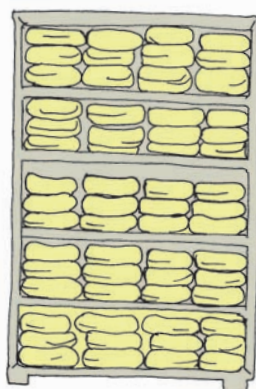
**Day and the Village Health and Sanitation**

**Committee meetings to discuss menstrual**

**hygiene:** Apart from girls, other women in the reproductive age group also need information on menstrual hygiene. You should use the opportunity to provide this information to women when they attend the VHND at the Anganwadi centre. The VHSC is also responsible for providing toilets in households and in schools. You should support this process by discussing the importance of toilets for girls in schools as an important component of menstrual hygiene.



- (iv) **Enabling regular availability of sanitary napkins to girls in the age group of 10-19 years:** You can obtain supplies of sanitary napkins from the ANM and supply them to girls during the monthly meeting. Girls who are unable to attend these meetings should be reached through home visits to ensure supply. Under the scheme, all rural adolescents will be supplied sanitary napkins at a reasonable price which would be fixed by the government.



- (v) **Maintaining an inventory of the stock and keeping accounts:** You will need to estimate the number of packs required for your village. Thus, you will require a list of girls in the age group of 10-19 years. In order to obtain the list, you can elicit support from the AWW and the members of the SHG. The stock of sanitary napkins can be obtained from the ANM. The ANM will also provide you with a one-time-impres fund of Rs.300, which she will take from the untied funds pool



of the sub centre. You will also get a pack of sanitary napkin for your own use.

You will follow these steps during purchase and sale of sanitary napkins:



- Use the imprest fund of Rs. 300 to purchase sanitary napkins from the ANM.
- Be responsible for the transportation and storage of napkins to the village.
- Supply the napkins to adolescent girls at a reasonable price.
- Retain an incentive of Re. 1 for every packet sold/distributed.
- Maintain a monthly record of sanitary napkin packs sold to the girls and keep account of the money recovered. The registers and accounts should be co-signed by a designated female member of the VHSC.

## Format A

Name of Girl	Whether APL or BPL		Jan		Feb		Mar		Apr		May	
	APL	BPL	Number of Sanitary napkin packs sold	Whether attended meeting	Number of Sanitary napkin packs sold	Whether attended meeting	Number of Sanitary napkin packs sold	Whether attended meeting	Number of Sanitary napkin packs sold	Whether attended meeting	Number of Sanitary napkin packs sold	Whether attended meeting
Total												

Jun		Jul		Aug		Sep		Oct		Nov		Dec	
Number of Sanitary napkin packs sold	Whether attended meeting	Number of Sanitary napkin packs sold	Whether attended meeting	Number of Sanitary napkin packs sold	Whether attended meeting	Number of Sanitary napkin packs sold	Whether attended meeting	Number of Sanitary napkin packs sold	Whether attended meeting	Number of Sanitary napkin packs sold	Whether attended meeting	Number of Sanitary napkin packs sold	Whether attended meeting
Total													

## Format B – Monthly Report

1. Name of ASHA:
2. Name of village :
3. Stock of Sanitary napkin packs at the beginning of the month:
4. Stock of Sanitary napkin packs at the end of the month:
5. Cost of transporting from Sub-Centre to village:

S. No.	Contact with Adolescent girls		Sunday meetings held						Number of Sanitary napkin packs sold		Amount of incentive earned	
	APL	BPL	Date	No. of girls attended meeting	Number of VHSC members attending the meeting	ANM present / not	AWW present / not	APL	BPL	APL	BPL	

