

Menstrual Hygiene Management (Periods)

Menstrual hygiene management (MHM) falls within the scope of Occupational Therapy as a self-care activity. Having a period can have a major impact on a person's chosen occupations, including going to school and engaging in leisure occupations. Everyone's period experience is unique, and if a menstruator* has a condition or impairment this may come with its own menstrual challenges/ considerations. It is important that MHM tasks are addressed with the same focus and importance as showering, cooking or accessing the classroom.

*A menstruator is a person who menstruates and therefore has menstrual health and hygiene needs – including girls, women, trans-women and non-binary persons.

Preparing your child for their period

Start talking early: since it is impossible to know exactly when your child will get their first period, it is important to take their personal preferences, personality and level of understanding into consideration when deciding when to discuss this topic. It may be helpful to start having regular talks about the changes your child is and will be experiencing when you notice the first signs of puberty (such as the start of breast development). When it's time to have this discussion, make sure you avoid euphemisms, doing this may send a message to your child that having a period is something to be ashamed of, just be clear! To aid the discussion and to support your child's understanding, there are many useful websites and books that can be accessed for free.

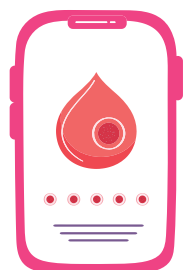


Show and tell: talk to your child about the range of period products on offer, including different sizes and shapes of pads, tampons with or without applicators, menstrual cups, and period underwear. It may be helpful for you to show them what you use; this will mean that you're keeping period hygiene management as an open topic.

A period pack: buy your child a pouch to put their products in so that they can carry it in their bag or keep it in a drawer at home. Pack a range of products of different sizes and absorbencies, and include items like spare underwear and hand sanitiser.

Managing periods

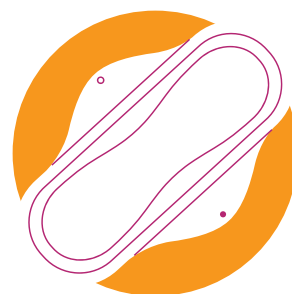
Tracking their cycle: tracking is a useful way to help your child better understand their cycle, understand their period itself, and to help them plan around it. For some people with epilepsy, seizures can be linked to the menstrual cycle, so tracking can help them be more aware of the risk. Some young people may also strive on routine and may benefit from tracking their cycle to avoid any unexpected changes to their preferred routines. There are many free apps available that can track a period cycle for you.



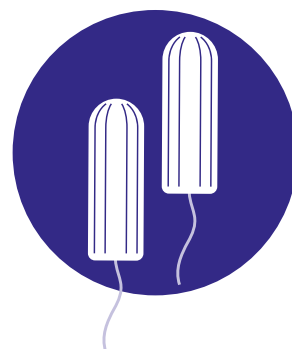
Period pain: period pain is common and a normal part of the menstrual cycle. It's usually felt as painful muscle cramps in the tummy, which can spread to the back and thighs. The pain sometimes comes in intense spasms, while at other times it may be dull but more constant. It may also vary with each period. Some periods may cause little or no discomfort, while for others may be more painful. In most cases, period pain can be treated at home, using painkillers, or self-help techniques including exercise, a warm bath or shower, hot water bottles or heat pad, massages and relaxation techniques. For some, period pain can be extremely painful and affect being able to perform normal daily activities. If you are concerned about the level of pain, which cannot be managed at home, you should seek advice from your GP.

Types of period products

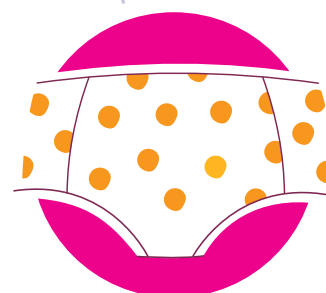
Sanitary towel/pads: they are attached to the inside of the user's underwear, and work by absorbing menstrual blood through layers of absorbent material. For young people with motor difficulties, it may be difficult to manage and use a pad as they are required to open the wrapper of the pad, stick the pad into the underwear, and then dispose of the wrapper and used pad. Some young people may find it uncomfortable to use a pad due to the feeling and sensation of it against the skin.



Tampons: tampons work by absorbing menstrual blood internally, and can be left in for about four hours, at which point they are removed by pulling gently on the string. Many users like tampons because they are more discreet than pads, both in terms of the smaller packaging and while they are being used (i.e. they are not visible on the underwear). However, some users with motor difficulties may struggle to insert and remove a tampon.



Period underwear: they look like regular underwear, except they have a special absorbent layer which prevents leakages onto clothing, and as they are washable, they are one of the most sustainable options available. A good pair will prevent odours emitting and will feel comfortable to the wearer. These can be an alternative for individuals who are uncomfortable using internal menstrual products or for people with sensitivities to disposable pads. They also may work well for people with mobility disorders or who need help from a caregiver to replace their menstrual products. Some underwear brands come with clasps on either side, making them more accessible.



Menstrual cups: this small silicone or latex cup works by being folded and inserted internally, where it collects blood. The folding and removing steps require a great deal of hand and finger mobility. Some brands provide a pull tab, to make it easier to remove the cup. The cups can stay in for up to 12 hours, at which point they should be removed, emptied, rinsed, and re-used as necessary. This may be helpful for some users as they are required to change this less frequently than a pad (every 3–4 hours) or a tampon (every 4–6 hours) and therefore minimise disruption to daily routines. Once inserted, the user should not feel the item, and therefore, may be better for people who dislike the feeling of a sanitary pad. They can be used for up to a decade making them one of the most eco-friendly options.




Helpful resources:

1. NHS (2019) Starting Your Periods: www.nhs.uk/conditions/periods/starting-periods
2. The Autism Friendly Guide to Periods: utismfriendlyperiods.com/
3. MS Society Periods and Multiple Sclerosis (MS):
www.mssociety.org.uk/about-ms/what-ms/women-and-ms/periods-contraception-and-ms
4. Always- Parent Corner:
www.always.co.uk/en-gb/tips-and-advice-for-girls-and-parents/parents-and-carers/
5. Unicef Ensuring Girls with Disabilities have Dignity when Managing their Periods:
www.unicef.org/esa/stories/ensuring-girls-with-disabilities-have-dignity
6. City to Sea (2020) Periods & Disability, Impairments And Conditions:
www.citytosea.org.uk/periods-and-disability-impairments-and-conditions/
7. Clue (2022) Disabled People Have Periods Too (a blog):
helloclue.com/articles/cycle-a-z/menstruating-while-disabled

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