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## A Brief Note on Menstrual Stigma: Social Assumptions and Responsibilities

**Chaturvedi B<sup>1\*</sup>, Goswami S<sup>1</sup>, Pal N<sup>1</sup>, Singh RP<sup>1</sup>, Yadav T<sup>1</sup>, Gangwar S<sup>1</sup>, Mishra KN<sup>2</sup>, Kumudhavalli MV<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Pharmacy, NIMS Institute of Pharmacy, NIMS University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India; <sup>2</sup>Department of Chemistry, Institution of Technology and Management, GIDA, Gorakhpur, India; <sup>3</sup>Department of Pharmaceutical Chemistry, Vinayaka Mission College of Pharmacy, Vinayaka Mission Research Foundation (Deemed University), Salem, Tamilnadu, India.

### ABSTRACT

Menstruation- a sign of women's well being. However, it is associated with a bunch of restrictions, taboos, and social myths. Menses begins at the onset of puberty biologically termed as menarche. It is usually associated with notorious discomfort, uneasiness and shyness. This review paper highlights the myths and assumptions of the society which is pulling down the status and self-confidence of women and proves that there is no gender equality rather it makes them silent. Our society has modified this physiological process in such a way that now it is a 'taboo' for boys males and females and hence established a communication gap, this gap creates difficulties to tackle with menstruation and leads to Reproductive Tract Infections (RTI) due to unhygienic practice and lack of correct information. One another important reason for unhygienic practice is limited economic resources. A study shows that only 15% of girls in India had access to sanitary pads during the lockdown. Also, the prime minister of India is planning to launch a scheme across India to ensure easy access at rs 1/ pad suvidha brand. However by increasing educational opportunities, empowerment we can overcome the cultural misinformation and taboos which has been transferred from generation to generation and make them physical psychologically strong and fit. This will create a healthy society which will be benefited by all.

**Key Words:** Menstruation, Taboos, Menarche, Myths, Empowerment

### INTRODUCTION

Menstruation has been a mystery throughout history.<sup>1</sup> But this mystery is completely a biological process that ensures the transformation of a young girl into women.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the story behind the menstruation by which females are blessed is very sorrowful because of society. Menstruation is derived from the Latin word "mensus" which means "month" or "period". The process is regulated by female sex hormones in which the endometrium, lining of the uterus thickens every month and shed off. This shedding process usually lasts for 3-7 days.<sup>3</sup> The amount of bloodshed off every month ranges from 29-80cc, an average of 35cc.<sup>4</sup>

Generally, it varies from female to female. This is a special phase of a woman's life that symbolizes good health; her ability to give birth to a new-born therefore menstruation must be celebrated. Menstruation in many countries including India is full of myths and taboos that date back. During menses, women's are considered impure, untouchable.<sup>5</sup> Some older Vedic books contemplate "earth" and "river" as

women and similar to the female Homo sapiens, earth and river also menstruate. And like women's earth and river are also considered impure during their menses. Hence sowing in the earth is avoided during the menstruation period of the earth. During monsoon, the bloody red colour of river water is considered as menstrual blood. Menstruation is associated with physical, social and mental discomfort due to which dysmenorrhea (period pain) is commonly observed in all menstruating women below the age of 25 but it has no pathological evidence.<sup>1</sup> Women usually take OTC analgesic like PCM or ibuprofen to relief dysmenorrhoea.<sup>6</sup> There are some latest phyto therapeutic based treatment including chaste berry – for mild sedation, feverfew- analgesic, anti-inflammatory, ginkgo Biloba- used in PMS treatment.

### MYTHS AND SOCIETY ASSUMPTION OF MENSTRUATION

Society has an indispensable impact on our minds sometimes pragmatic and sometimes it serves as pessimistic. As society assumptions are the myths hence varies differently in differ-

#### Corresponding Author:

**Bhumi Chaturvedi**, Department of Pharmacy, NIMS Institute of Pharmacy, NIMS University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India.  
Phone: 8851262932; Email: [bhumi.chaturvedi400@gmail.com](mailto:bhumi.chaturvedi400@gmail.com)

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ent countries. But a common myth about menstruating women is that they are sinful.<sup>1</sup> Women's during their periods are not allowed to cook food, not allowed to touch pickles and other sour food products because the people believe that the foul odour that comes from their body will spoil the things. Apart from this, they are not permitted in any temple or other religious place but there is no scientific proof behind this.<sup>2,7</sup> People also believe that menses are associated with evil spirits and some malicious person can use menstrual blood for black magic this is why women bury their used cloth.<sup>3</sup> The sad truth is behind this is that in Asia these are still practices without any logic. In most of the place, menstruation is a female thing and girls and women's are not allowed to discuss with the male members of the family, not even any serious problems which are shameful. This attitude towards menstruation forces a woman to feel embarrassment and shame about this virtue which cause psychological harassment.<sup>5,8</sup>

There are bulks of restrictions which bound female while menstruation as they are not allowed to read books, not play music because it makes mischief their menses.<sup>1</sup> Female are not allowed to do physical exercise because people believe it may cause dysmenorrhoea and side effects but doing exercise will make them healthy and happy as of the release of serotonin- also known as the happy hormone.<sup>6</sup> Some myths and social assumptions regarding menstruation are tabulated in Table 1. Believes are so weird that a cow becomes fertile if touched by a menstruating girl. Most of the girls in rural areas drop out the school when they began menstruation and some girls miss school during their menstrual period.<sup>1</sup> Common toilets in the schools of villages both for the boys and girls negatively impacted school participation.<sup>1</sup> Along with the inadequate knowledge and failure of private space for sanitation women's handle difficulties during the menstrual cycle every month.<sup>9</sup>

In India, 77% of the women use old cloth and reuse it and 88% of women use ashes, newspaper, dried leaves, sand etc. Overall apart from myths, hygiene management is nil as these things can cause serious RTI. In the Brazil tribe, menstruating women are kept in a separate room and all the other members of the tribe pull her hair. In Europe, people think that if a menstruating woman is near to a sick person; her condition will get worse.<sup>7</sup>

**Table 1: Myths and facts related to menstruation**

MYTHS	FACTS
When adolescent girls, women are doing cycling, swimming or any kind of physical activities during periods, their menstrual flow can be disrupted. <sup>10</sup>	Cycling, swimming, exercise or other physical activities can help to relieve menstrual pain. <sup>10</sup>

**Table 1: (Continued)**

MYTHS	FACTS
Menstruating girls, women should sleep in a separate shed or room. <sup>11</sup>	Menstruation is not contagious or harmful for others that menstruating women should sleep in a separate room. <sup>11</sup>
Eating sour foods like curd, tamarind and pickles disturb the menstrual flow. <sup>12</sup>	The foods cannot decide or affect the menstrual flow. <sup>12</sup>
If girls during their period touch plants then plant die. <sup>11</sup>	The survival or dying of plants depends on the care of the plants. It has no relation to women's periods. <sup>11</sup>
Women should be bought their sanitary napkins privately and wrap them with paper or bags. <sup>13</sup>	A Sanitary napkin is one of the other essential items. There is no need to maintain privacy while buying it. <sup>13</sup>
Menstruating girls, women are not allowed to cook, should not worship their deities or go to the holy places. <sup>14,15</sup>	Periods are a natural phenomenon like birth so these types of restrictions on menstruating women are just a sign of ignorance. <sup>14</sup>
It is very shameful to talk or discuss the periods publicly. <sup>16</sup>	The period is one type of physical cycle of women that are so normal to talk or discuss. <sup>16</sup>
Girls, women should not wash their hair, can't bathe well with soap during their periods. <sup>17</sup>	In reality, taking a warm water bath relaxes them from menstrual irritation, mood swings and relieves their menstrual cramps. <sup>17</sup>
Sexual intercourse during the period is very harmful and unhealthy. <sup>17,18</sup>	Evidence said that menstrual flow acts as a lubricant which makes sex (safe sex with protection) during periods more comfortable relieves stress and cramps. <sup>17,19</sup>

## RESPONSIBILITY OF THE SOCIETY

We all know that the mothers are our teacher in all aspects similarly mother is the primary source of information for every new menstruating girl also.<sup>2</sup> But the majority of these girls do not know menses before their first period. A UNICEF study revealed that 1 in every 3 girls in South Asia has no idea of menstruation before their first period.<sup>4</sup> Hence sudden menarche makes them cry. They are told by their mother's not to share with anyone. Also, teachers are not able to discuss the topic frankly but this wall of shyness between teachers and girls need to be broken.<sup>6</sup> Therefore together mother's and teachers should teach them about menses at a certain age and make them comfortable with menstruation before their real experience so that it will not be something very new n scary, they should tell them about PMS includes mood

swings, tender breast, irritability, food craving, fatigue etc.<sup>20</sup> The embarrassment about the naturally occurring periods is so deep-rooted which is harming the girls so badly, therefore, it requires immediate action.<sup>2,4</sup> Along with this, they should be taught to maintain good menstrual hygiene and the various products available in the market to use during menstruation like pads, tampons, menstrual cups etc. and the instructions for proper disposal.<sup>3</sup>

Menstruation is a female thing but it is not written anywhere that it cannot be discussed with boys and men. A research study shows that the majority of the boys said “WE DON’T KNOW” about menstruation; some thought that it is a disease. Boys in school make fun of girls which gives them mental discomfort and embarrassment. So society needs to change such things and practice to think in a general way by understanding the natural rules of nature. Instead, boys and men should talk to them nicely, ask for any help, make them laugh; make them feel happy by doing things they love like cooking, shopping, going out etc.<sup>21</sup> Boys and the men of the family should support the females and there should be a healthy environment to discuss menses just like any other natural phenomenon this will make them feel comfortable.<sup>8,9</sup> The cultural restrictions which abide them to discuss shall be stopped immediately.

## DISCUSSION

This review paper concludes the myth followed in various countries and the role of the mother’s, teachers and men’s to vanish such practices. Instead of creating a taboo everyone should get enough knowledge and make women’s feel comfortable and confident. In one cross-sectional Knowledge and Practice study in Baghdad among 1084 women age between 15-21 years had been found that 36% of them have a good knowledge regarding the menstrual cycle, 84.2% of girls avoid physical activities during their periods and 22.6% did not take a shower while menstruating.<sup>22</sup> Another cross-sectional KAP (Knowledge, Attitude and Practice) study among 187 adolescent girls from four government schools of Delhi, India revealed that major groups of girls nearly 95.7% of girls are unaware of the source of uterine bleeding. Only 40% of girls had known about the menstrual cycle properly. Among 60% of girls were facing menstrual cramps and 34% did not bath during menses.<sup>23</sup> Because of the negative approach about menstruation pulls a girl to fall behind boys not only in education but in sports and other extra curriculum activities. So it is the responsibility of the families, schools and society especially doctors and pharmacists to create awareness, provide complete correct information regarding sex education to both boys and girls and remove their myths, an embarrassment in discussing menstruation with anybody. Therefore everyone should respect this power of procreation as nature’s blessing.

The qualitative survey in Maharashtra revealed that 40% of the young girls did not receive any information before their onset of menstruation.<sup>30</sup> Another study tells that only 36% of women in India use sanitary pads rest all still use other alternatives and put their lives at huge risks.<sup>23</sup> Some foundations like “Goonj” and “Sukhibhava” are also working in rural and slum area to end the menstrual stigma, taboo, myths and creating awareness for menstrual hygiene practices.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of writing about menstruation and society assumptions is to make people think from a different edge and also to create awareness about various ruthless myths and taboos. By providing correct information right from the home and school will remove the communication gap and shyness among all generations, which is a major issue regarding menstruation. A small change in our mentality and vision regarding menses can create a healthy environment. Also supporting girls in all situations make them super bold to tackle any problems. An overall change in the social perception is very important to overcome these assumptions faced by the majority of girls all over the world especially rural urban areas. This change will also prevent deadly infections occur due to a lack of knowledge about menstruations hygiene. So there is a need to change the view towards menstruation and menstruating women.

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