

ABCs girl

of being a





Personal details

name

date of birth

name of school

name of village

T/A

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Preface

This Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) booklet is intended for adolescent girls and young women. In Malawi, issues associated with menstruation and sexual development are never discussed openly. This deafening silence surrounding menstruation burdens young girls by keeping them ignorant and falling victim to taboos surrounding their own biological development. Even after girls experience their first period, very little information is given to them about the physiological processes their bodies encounter and the hygienic practices necessary to stay healthy.

Despite two decades of free primary education in Malawi girls' dropout rates is still higher than that of boys. Primary education completion rate for girls is only 35%, while transition rate to secondary school is 22%. Furthermore only 7% of our girls complete secondary education. There are various reasons for our girls dropping out of school. However, a lack of WASH facilities and information on their changing bodies should not be a reason for girls dropping out of school. Through such initiatives as with this MHM booklet and many other advocacy initiatives going on in Malawi, our nation is intent

to stand behind our girls and promote keeping girls in school from basic primary education well into and through secondary education.

The absence of MHM in policy debates is a concern in Malawi. There is need to highlight issues relating to adolescent girls attendance, transition and completion of primary and secondary education. The need for gender sensitivity in WASH facilities to provide for the needs of women and girls in our society is a critical input required to be integrated in our society.

It is our hope that this book will be used by all women and adolescent girls in Malawi and by all organizations concerned with the welfare of our women and girls. As knowledge proves to be power this book will help to keep our women and girls informed and build the confidence of our growing adolescents as they journey through life to become our future leaders.



Lonely Magreta

Secretary for Education Science & Technology Malawi

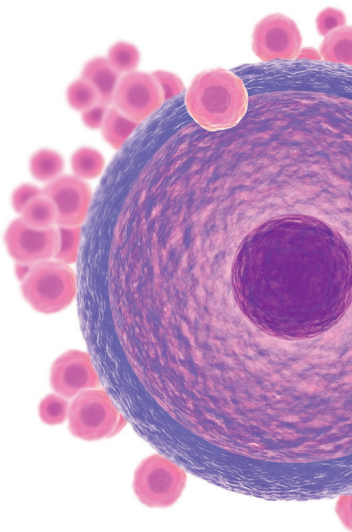
about this book

What comes to your mind when you think about growing up? Have you ever thought that one day you will start having periods? Or have you already started having periods?

What myths and rumours have you heard about periods? This book will help you understand your body and bust the myths and rumours around periods.

This book is for adolescent girls and young women. It will give you answers to some of the questions that you may have about having periods. It will help you understand what it means for a girl to start having periods and how to practice good menstrual hygiene.

Read it carefully and discuss it with friends. It may not give you answers to all the questions you may have, but it will try. If you have more questions, talk to a female teacher, mother or any other elderly women that you trust.



What are periods?

Menstruation is the release of blood from the womb and the vagina by a woman. It is sometimes called a period because it happens every month.

- Every woman starts to menstruate at one point or another in her life. This is normal about girls.
- Menstruation normally starts when a girl is between 9 – 14 years old. This can however differ. Some girls can start menstruation earlier than 9 years while some can start later than 14 years old.
- When you start your period, it is just the right time for you. The body starts when it is ready. Being early is just as normal as being late.
- When a girl starts with her periods, it means she can become pregnant at any time in the month if she has unprotected sex.



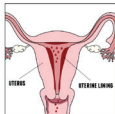
- Starting your periods is one of the biggest changes in your life as an adolescent girl. It is a turning point in your development from childhood to adulthood.
- Your first period can be unexpected, and you might be frightened to find some bleeding from your vagina. Just remember that this is a natural process for every female person.
- Periods last between 3-7 days. Duration of the period vary among girls. Some may experience it in few days while some experience it in more days.
- The next period begins about 21-28 days after the previous period. This 28-day cycle is called your period cycle.

what happens during the cycle

- Every month, a woman's body produces an egg.
- In the middle of your cycle (day 12-15 in a 28 day cycle) one of your ovaries releases the egg. This is called 'ovulation'.
- The egg moves into the womb through the fallopian tube. At the same time, your body tissues and blood cells start lining the walls of your womb. This happens in your womb and you cannot feel any of this happening!
- If the egg is not fertilized, it is released as your period fluid. Once released, the process starts again.

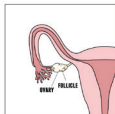
day 1

Start of your periods.



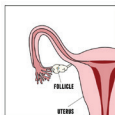
day 7

Bleeding has stopped.



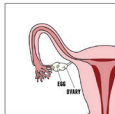
day 7 - 14

An egg is produced. The womb lining is thickening and is rich with nutrients and blood.



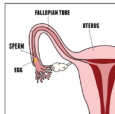
day 14

Hormones cause the egg to be produced from the ovary, this is called ovulation.



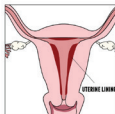
day 15 - 24

The egg travels through the fallopian tube, down the womb, which if fertilized will continue through the fallopian tube and attached to the lining of the womb.



day 25

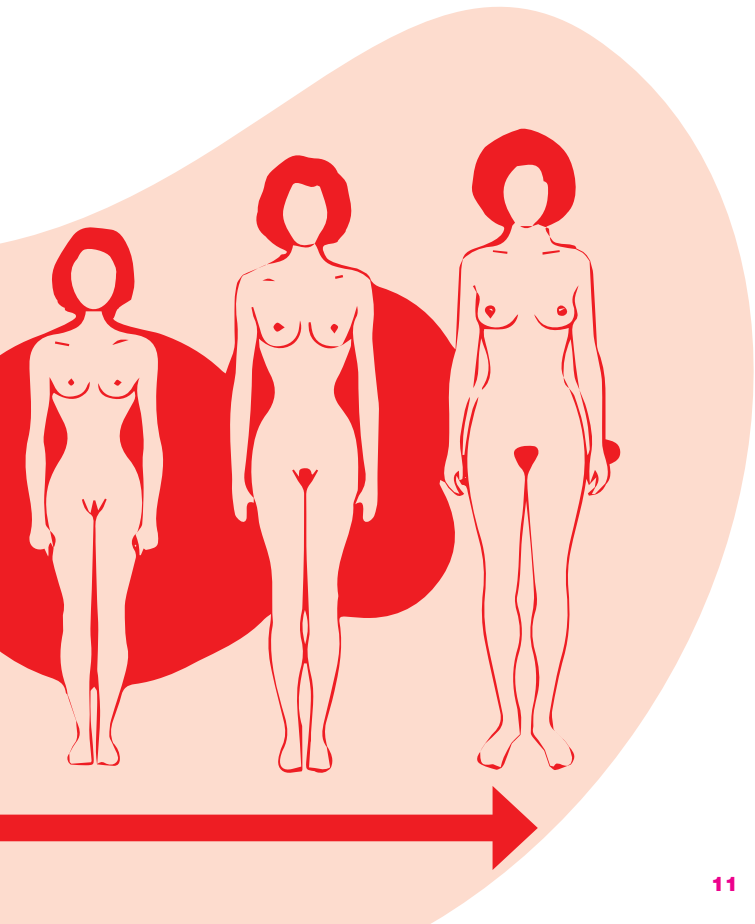
If the egg is not fertilized then hormone levels will drop. This will signal the next period cycle to start. The released egg will break apart and shed on the next period.



What body changes will I notice?

- a) **Breast development** which starts between the ages of 8 - 13 years. One breast may grow faster than the other. Any difference in the size of breasts should not worry young girls because by the time the development is complete, there is no difference.
- b) **Widening of hips.**
- c) **Growing taller.** Girls reach 98% of their height by age 16.
- d) **Pimples, sweat & body odour** – due to hormonal activity, some adolescents may get pimples and this is absolutely normal. During puberty, young people might feel overly sensitive or become easily upset. You may also be concerned about how your body looks. Losing temper more than usual and getting angry with friends or family members happen more easily. It is common to feel sad or depressed sometimes. Young people should talk to adults they trust about any feelings of anger, sadness, or depression they may have.
- e) **Pubic hair** – Between the age of 10 to 14, hair begins to grow in the genital area and armpits.
- f) **Periods** – This is the monthly small amount of bleeding from the vagina and is a normal process.





Why do girls have periods?

menstruation phases

It is a natural process of growing up that all girls experience periods. This is a part of the reproductive process for women. Girls have periods because they can now fall pregnant if they have unprotected sex.

The periods will stop at some point in a woman's life. This ending of your period cycle is called menopause. It normally happens from the age of 50 years and above. Menopause may come earlier or later in life for some women. When a woman reaches menopause, she can no longer fall pregnant.

how do girls get pregnant?

Pregnancy happens when a man's sperm fertilizes the egg of a female in the womb. This happens when a girl who has reached puberty has sex with a man who can produce sperms.



- If you have sex in the middle of your cycle, and sperms from the man fertilizes the egg, you can become pregnant.
- If your egg is not fertilized, it dissolves and leaves your body as part of your period.



important information

Reaching puberty does not mean that your body is ready for pregnancy. It is one of the processes of growing up. Avoid having sex to avoid getting pregnant at a young age. If you are already sexually active, always use condoms to prevent getting pregnant and getting sexually transmitted illnesses.

Know your cycle



“

I'm a 28 day cycle girl. Which one are you? Find out using this chart”



Things you need to know

understand your cycle



You must know the number of days your period takes to finish. You must also know when the next period will most probably occur from the previous one.

Your period may be irregular during the first years. This may make it hard to know the exact numbers that your period takes.



You must know when you have heavy flow or light flow during your periods. This helps so you know which days to pack extra pads in your bag.

Always prepare for your periods. Always have your pads ready because periods may start earlier than you expected.

“

“Sorry Maggie that I spoke with you rudely earlier. It’s just that I have a headache and my tummy hurts a bit today.”

how can I know that I may have a period soon?

There are different things that girls experience that can make them know if the period will start soon. Not all girls experience the same signs.

Remember to always use the calendar to know when your next period will start. These signs confirm the stating of your periods soon.



Bleeding from the vagina is the primary sign of your periods. Some girls have other symptoms around the time of their periods, including:



cramping, bloating, and sore breasts.



food cravings. salty and or sweet.



Mood swings and irritability.



headache and fatigue.



important information

All these symptoms are normal. As you grow up, they may slowly reduce.

If you experience all the above symptoms but no period blood, contact your nearest health worker.

Survival Guide to Periods

Do not be afraid of your periods. Your first period may be an embarrassing experience. It may start at a time when you did not expect it. Remember, it is completely natural and normal and it means you are healthy. Having a period means your body is growing normally.

here are some of the things that you can do when you start your periods

Talk to someone: mother/aunt/sister/ female teacher

It is better to tell someone close to you like your mother, aunt or any grown up person that you trust. They can advise you on what to do or help you get through it.

Do not be embarrassed to talk to someone because every woman goes through it.

Some might start their period early, while others may start late. Being late can feel just as embarrassing as being early, but remember that you will get your period just in time for when your body is ready for it.”



tips



Drink lots of water

Because your body is losing a lot of fluids, you need to replace some.



Exercise

Do not let periods get in the way of your favourite sports.



Use a sanitary pad, cloth or cup.

Always have one in your bag and change when necessary.



Talk to a female teacher or family member

Do not be afraid to ask questions. This will only help you understand your body better and build your self-confidence as you grow up.

Personal Hygiene



“It means you must put on pads properly to make sure that blood doesn’t spill out”

“It may also mean touching blood which can happen during changing of pads.”

Personal hygiene is very important when you are having a period.

tips to maintain period hygiene

- **Keep private parts clean:** Make sure that you wash your private parts with water at least twice a day. This will reduce the risk of bad body smell and infections.
- **Wash your body:** Once you start your period, your body produces more oil and sweat. Always give careful attention to personal cleanliness before and during your periods. This will make you more comfortable and confident. Pay special attention to your armpits.
- **Wash clothes and dry them in the sun:** Always wash your clothes, menstrual cloth if you use one and especially shirts and underwear with soap. Dry all clothes in the sun.

- **Wash your hands with soap:** Always wash your hands before and after changing your sanitary pad.

girl tips to develop good hygiene practices:

- **Always wash your hands with soap and clean water after using the toilet and before touching food.**
- **Always wash you private parts:** If you are unable to bath or shower, make sure that you clean your genital area daily using a mild soap and water to help eliminate bad smell.
- **Wipe after visiting the toilet:** Wipe the genitals from front to back after using the toilet to prevent the spread of germs.



“The body produces more oil and sweat which can produce bad smell.”



“It means producing period blood which if not changed regularly can cause bad odor.”



“It means we must be mindful of our personal hygiene as well as other people.”

- **Always wash your underwear** with soap before and after using the toilet and whenever changing period protection. And remember: always wash and dry your underwear in the sun!

- During heavy flow days, you may need to change your pad every 3-4 hours. Example: Use one in the morning, change at lunch time and then change again at night time.

how often should I change my pad?

- Sanitary pads must be changed as often as necessary, before the pad is soaked with period flow.
- You must not wait until your pad is too wet to hold the period flow.
- Inform your teacher that you are having a period because you may need to go out of the class more often.
- Do not wait for too long to change pads even if the flow is light. If you wait too long, the lack of airing creates a good environment for bacteria which might cause irritation.

managing periods at school

Your teacher may not know that you are having a period. She may therefore refuse to give you permission to go out or force you to stand for some reason. What you must know is that every teacher knows that at your age you may have started your periods.

what to do

- Tell your teacher that you are having periods and that you may need to check yourself time and again.
- You may also tell the teacher to excuse you from standing up and down.

Myths Busted



What rumors have you heard about periods? Let's clear some of them up!



1. Is a girl abnormal if she misses her period but she is sure she is not pregnant?

If she is not sexually active, then maybe there is something medically wrong. If this happens for more than 3 months then a girl should contact her nearest health worker. Or tell a female teacher or family member to take you there.

2. Is it abnormal to have irregular periods? Why do they happen?

No. All girls are different in their growing up. Just as some girls are tall others short, some have small breasts others bigger, your period cycle is unique to you.

3. Should a girl go home if she starts her periods at school?

No she should not. For as long as she has pads, she can remain in school. A girl should always tell her female teacher when on her periods so they know she will want to go to the toilet often to check herself or change pads. There is no need to stay at home and miss classes. Girls having

periods can do anything that any other girl can do, including attending classes and doing sports.

4. Are period pains and cramps a sign of bad spirits? Why do they happen and what can a girl do to feel better?

No they are not. You experience these abdominal cramps and pains because during your periods, your womb muscles are working hard to push out the blood.

5. Is it true that your father will die if you put salt for other people when cooking? Can a girl consume salt during her periods?

No, a girl's father will not die. This was a way mothers back in the day could track that their daughters have had their monthly period when they ask another person to put salt in the pots. There is nothing wrong with using salt when a girl is having a period. However, lower intake of sodium salts helps in reducing the bloated feeling during periods.

6. Are girls unclean during their periods?

No, this is a natural process, with proper hygiene practices, a girl should never feel unclean.

7. Is it bad luck to talk to male people during your periods?

Not at all. This is just one of the many myths elders created to hope girls do not sleep with boys at a young age.

8. Can a girl fall pregnant by talking to men during her periods?

No you can only fall pregnant if you have unprotected sex with a man. If a girl has decided to start having sex, then she should always insist on using a condom. This will save you from not only falling pregnant but also from contracting sexually transmitted illnesses.

9. Will bad spirits attack me if I throw my used pads in the bush?

No, but it is bad hygiene practice to throw your used pad

in the open. You should always throw it in a pit latrine or burn your used pads.

10. Is a girl abnormal if she has not started her periods by age 13?

No he is completely normal. However, if a girl has not started her periods by age 17, then she should contact a health worker.

11. Is true that if a girl has sex then her period pains will stop?

No. As explained in no.2 your womb muscles will contract and expand during your periods to push out the blood. Having sex will not change this. If a girl decides to have sex, be sure to stay safe and condomise.

Notes



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Developing capacity and knowledge in Menstrual Hygiene among school girls

School girls need to receive information about period hygiene and management, about the biological facts and practical ways of managing periods in a hygienic and discrete way. UNICEF Malawi through the Keeping Girls in School (KGIS) project is committed to support secondary school girls in Malawi by providing them with comprehensive information regarding period hygiene and management in order to address some the challenges they face.

#KeepingGirlsInSchool

Got any questions? HELPLINE
80001234 or 116

