



**Episode 61 – Periods: Why so taboo?
Or: Periods: Questions, Confusions, Myths, and Misconceptions.**

Written and hosted by Lisa Dawn Hamilton

Welcome to Do We Know Things? A podcast where we examine things we think we know about sex.

Content warning: This podcast will include discussions of menstruation.

Hi everyone! I am Dr. Lisa Dawn Hamilton, professor of psychology and sex educator. Today on Do We Know Things, what don't you know about periods?

Aunt Flo, Shark Week, Time of the Month. These are all euphemisms used to avoid saying menstruation. Menstruation happens to half of the population at some point in their lives, but it is taboo in many places. This taboo prevents us from talking openly about menstruation and the menstrual cycle because it is seen as icky and gross. Of all the topics related to sex, the menstrual cycle might be the most shrouded in mystery. Some of you might feel uncomfortable just from me saying the word menstruation so much already. If that's you, I encourage you to keep listening to get more comfortable.

Or maybe you are thinking "I already know everything about periods." And maybe you do, but I am regularly surprised by how many university students I encounter who do not know the basics of their menstrual cycle, their hormone changes, and their risks for pregnancy. Many are surprised by how little they know when they thought they knew it all because they have periods every month. How much pain is normal during your period? Is PMS real? When during the cycle is pregnancy a risk? Can you answer these questions?

Remember that epic cross-continental road trip I was on back in episodes 56 & 58? Well, now I'm on the return journey. So I've made the decision to split this episode into two parts... so I will get to your listener questions about menstruation in two weeks time. (The questions were great, by the way). For this episode, I will go over the basics of the menstrual cycle, explain what PMS actually is, and address some myths.

That's coming up on Do We Know Things!

But first!

In an upcoming series of episodes, I am going to tackle menopause, perimenopause, and all of the myths and misunderstandings surrounding it. I want to hear your questions and your experiences! I would love to include recordings of people talking about their perimenopause experiences because they are so varied. You can DM me on Instagram @doweknowthings, email me at doweknowthings@gmail.com to send a recording or a question. For typed questions or

comments, you can also click the link in the show notes to send them anonymously! You can also send more period questions for the next episode too!

Period Shame

Dr. Jen Gunter, author of the new book about menstruation called *Blood* went viral recently for a talk show segment where she railed against the absurdity of calling menstrual products, “feminine hygiene products.”

Dr. Gunter Clip: It's like nails on a chalkboard for me. So, first of all, menstruation has nothing to do with being feminine. And there are trans people who menstruate, there's nonbinary people who menstruate, and also do we really want to attach the word feminine to menstruation for an 11 year old? Right? Like think about it in all different kinds of ways. Secondly hygiene means you're dirty, and you're not dirty. It's just menstruation!

I agree with her! Why can't we have the word menstrual on a sign in the pharmacy? It is a bodily function. If I need something for a cough, I go to the aisle that says cough and cold medicine. If I need to wipe my butt, I go to the aisle that says toilet paper. Why can't I go to an aisle that says menstruation when I need something for my menstruation?

I asked Chat GPT... *I know, very 2023 of me...* to tell me places where menstruation wasn't taboo and it came back with: some Indigenous cultures, some African cultures, and the state of Kerala in India. Taking everything that comes from ChatGPT with a grain of salt because of the biases and flaws inherent in all AI, I asked a friend from Kerala if that was true compared to his experiences in the U.S. and Canada. He said that it did seem fairly accurate. Menstruation is not a hidden secret, there is a celebration when someone has their first period, and Kerala allows people who are menstruating to go to temple, which is not the case in most Hindu temples. So not all cultures have the taboos around menstruation that we have in North America. Taboos come from cultural ideas about what is right and wrong and what is good and bad. But there is nothing wrong with menstruation, so let's start combatting these taboos with the basics.

The Basics

As I have been writing this episode, I keep thinking, I need to start even before I thought I did. At first I started with hormones, but then realized I need to explain the different phases of the menstrual cycle. And then when I was writing that part, I realized I should probably describe the anatomy. I am trying hard not to assume people know anything about these organs or the menstrual cycle.

So, here's the part of the podcast where I give you permission to skip ahead. Depending on how good your sex education was.. and no shame if it wasn't good... this may all be old hat to you. But if it was, let's say just ok, then you may need to refamiliarize on how it all works. So yes, hit that 15 second, 30 second fast forward if you're heard it before but don't skip it all, because you might just learn something you didn't know.

Here goes....

So, for the very, very basics. Much of the action I am talking about involves the uterus, ovaries, and vagina. The vagina is the *canal* that leads to the uterus. I specify canal because the outside part of the body is called the vulva, but so many people erroneously call that part the vagina. But, vulva is outside, vagina is inside. At the top of the vagina is the cervix, which is a cute little donut-shaped nub at the base of the uterus. It has a small hole in the centre that is about 2mm in diameter in people who have not had children. It is also the part of the body that gets dilated to 10 cm when someone gives birth! And yes, it does shrink back down after you've given birth, but it's usually a bit bigger than 2 mm. The cervix is attached to the uterus, which is roughly the size -and shape of an upside-down pear when it doesn't contain a fetus. During pregnancy, it is where the fetus lives. Attached to the cervix are the fallopian tubes and at the end of the fallopian tubes, close, but not quite touching, are the ovaries. The ovaries where the eggs are stored. People with ovaries are born with all the eggs they will ever have, unlike people with testes where sperm is constantly generated!

I am going to talk though all of the shifts that happen in the body throughout the menstrual cycle. When I teach this in real life, I use a diagram for reference, so if you want to follow along, you can check out the [Wikipedia entry for menstrual cycle](#), which has a few good diagrams. I will link it in the show notes. Day 1 of the menstrual cycle is the first day of your period. So, the first day you have a regular menstrual flow, not just spotting. This is an easy day to count as Day 1 because it is obvious, whereas the other phases are perhaps less obvious. Phases of the menstrual cycle are usually discussed in terms of what the ovaries are doing, so I am going to use those names here, but some people might use the uterine phase names instead. The first phase is the follicular phase. So, if we assume a 28-day cycle, the follicular phase lasts the first 13-14 days. It is called the follicular phase because it is when follicles in one of the ovaries are preparing to release an egg. Around about Day 7, one follicle becomes dominant, and that is the one that will release an egg that month. On roughly day 14, the follicle ruptures and releases the egg. This process is called ovulation. The egg is viable for about 24 hours for fertilization by sperm.

After the egg is released, the body starts preparing for a potential fertilized egg to implant. The follicle that held the egg turns into something called a corpus luteum, which means yellow body and the corpus luteum starts producing progesterone, a hormone named for its role in promoting gestation aka pregnancy. The corpus luteum gives this phase its name – the luteal phase. The uterine lining, which has been thickening, continues to do so in preparation for an embryo to implant. The vast majority of the time, there is no embryo to attach to the uterine wall, so after another 13-14 days, the uterine lining sloughs off and the blood and lining and some mucus come out as a period, and we start the process all over again.

One of the things that changes over the course of your cycle is body temperature. You can track this by taking your temperature under your tongue every morning as soon as you wake up before you do anything else. If you are interested in monitoring your body temp to track your cycle, you need a basal body thermometer, which is one that gives you two digits after the decimal. Regular thermometers only go one digit past the decimal, and that isn't specific enough to see the changes.

During the follicular phase, your body is at a low temperature. Shortly before ovulation, it will dip a tiny bit and then after ovulation it rises about 0.5 degrees Celsius and stays elevated throughout the luteal phase. I have been monitoring my morning temperature for about 8 years now, and I love it! I love being aware of what is going on with my body, when I am ovulating, and most importantly, when I can expect my period. I had a copper IUD for many years, so I didn't need to worry about pregnancy, but I still liked to track my cycle. Tracking your temperature is only useful if you aren't using a hormonal form of birth control, though. The app I use, Natural Cycles, is also approved in the U.S. and Canada as birth control.

Hormones & Ovulation

Ok, so here's where we talk about hormones. And this is where it gets a bit more science-y, so stay with me.

Your hormones change depending on the point of the cycle you are in. The main hormones involved in this system are estradiol, progesterone, luteinizing hormone (LH), and follicle stimulating hormone (FSH). Estradiol is an estrogen. It is named for estrus, which is the name for menstruation in other mammalian species. Progesterone, as I mentioned, is named for its role in promoting gestation. On day 1, estradiol and progesterone are low. Estrogen ramps up slowly through the follicular phase, while progesterone stays low. FSH is also fairly low, but it is secreted in small amounts to stimulate the follicle to develop, as its name implies. As estradiol increases, it inhibits FSH. That is until estradiol peaks. This spike in estradiol triggers a spike in both LH and FSH, which causes ovulation to occur. If you are tracking your cycle and using ovulation test strips that you pee on, what you are measuring there is LH.

Right before ovulation, some people experience pain in the pelvic region during ovulation, usually on the side of one ovary. This is called mittelschmerz, which is a German word that means middle pain. For me this started happening to me about 2 years ago, and I find it agonizingly painful. I feel it around my ovary and get shooting pains down my leg. I always thought the pain was related to the egg ripping from the ovary, but I JUST found out the other day, that it is apparently linked with a spike of LH, which happens about 12 hours before ovulation. It definitely *feels like* something is ripping out of my ovary, though.

Anyway! After the spike of LH, ovulation occurs about 12 hours later, as I said. Shifting into the luteal phase, the corpus luteum starts to secrete progesterone. Here estradiol hovers around a medium level. As it becomes clear there is no implanted embryo, both estradiol and progesterone start to decrease a few days before your period. One theory of PMS is that it might be caused by the rapid decrease of these hormones. Once estradiol and progesterone decrease, the uterus then begins the menstruation process and we are back to Day 1 of the cycle again.

As I mentioned in the last episode, Love is Blind and Birth Control is Complicated, your cervical fluid also changes over the cycle. And yes, there should be evidence of cervical fluid in your underwear. There was a weird social media trend going on a couple years back where women were showing their panties without any fluids on them to prove... something? I am not sure what. But stuff is supposed to come out of your vagina!! During your period, you have period blood. A few days after your period will be dry days where there isn't noticeable fluid. Then

there will be 3-4 days of thick, sticky, white-ish fluid. As you approach ovulation, the fluid gets wetter and slipperier, kind of like raw egg whites. The belief is that this helps sperm more easily get to the egg to fertilize it once it is released. After ovulation, you may have a mix of dry days and sticky days.

The median length of a full menstrual cycle is 28 days, but a normal range is 21 to 35 days. Your cycle might be consistent at one of these numbers or it might fluctuate month to month. My cycle has been pretty consistent at 25 days for the last 6 years or so after being about 28 or 29 days for 6 years before that. And before that, I was on the pill, so I didn't have a cycle. A shortened cycle or a lengthened cycle can be a sign of perimenopause.

Menstruation lasts 3-7 days for most people. If your period is lasting longer than 7 days, you may want to see a doctor to see if something is wrong.

Questions, Confusions, Myths, and Misconceptions

So what are some period questions and confusions, myths and misconceptions that I think need to be addressed? Here are a few I have heard over the years.

The first is the use of the phrase "She must be on her period" when a woman is at all irritable. This phrase drives me nuts for many reasons. 1. If someone does experience negative mood and irritability related to their cycle, it is usually associated with the premenstrual time, which is why PMS stands for *Pre* Menstrual Syndrome. Not *During* Menstrual Syndrome. It happens before the period starts. 2. Its sexist and invalidating. There are many reasons for a person to be irritable or sad and reducing people's moods to their menstrual phase is demeaning. 3. It's lazy. 4. If you are experiencing pain with your period, it might also make you more irritable, and that is legitimate!

Another misconception is that everyone with a period gets PMS. This is also not true. It varies by culture and by individual. Some cultures do not have the link between mood and cycle as part of their culture, and so it just doesn't really show up. Research has shown in some geographic locations, like remote high-altitude places, that progesterone is lower compared to people who live in lower altitude places, although still in the normal range (Vitzthum, 2013). This shift in progesterone can also affect their experience of PMS, and many don't report it. In studies across the cycle in healthy young adults, there are no clear links between mood and cycle phase for the average healthy person (Lorenz et al., 2017). However, many people do still report experiencing PMS, and there is documented evidence that it can happen and may be linked to hormonal changes in the body. Some people also experience what is called Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder, which are severe emotional symptoms in the late luteal phase.

For people who do experience PMS, it can be linked to anxiety, low mood, irritability, as well as physical symptoms like lower back ache or leg pains. To my knowledge, I didn't really experience PMS for most of my life. I was also on the pill from ages 20-30, so didn't have any hormonal cycles for 10 years. And even after I went off, I didn't notice anything for the first few years. However, probably about 8 years ago, I started to notice I would get really intense free-floating anxiety about 5-6 days before my period. Every single time it happened I would spend

the whole day being like “WHAT IS WRONG WITH ME??? WHY AM I SO ANXIOUS FOR NO REASON???” This went on for a long time before I finally figured out the link. Now I can usually notice it when it’s happening, but I still have those days of despair where I cannot figure out why I feel so anxious. Usually by the end of the day, I will clue in, though.

Another period-related thing that I find frustrating is the norm that periods should be painful. And yes, when the uterus is contracting to expel the blood and endometrial cells, there is likely going to be cramping, but the pain should not be unbearable. For most people, period cramps can be helped by an anti-inflammatory, like Aleve or Ibuprofen, but for others, it’s just not enough. And if you have intense, debilitating pain, please see a doctor to explore other options. And don’t let a doctor dismiss you with the belief that periods should be painful. It could be that you have another condition like fibroids or endometriosis that is causing the pain and should be addressed. It’s possible that hormonal birth control can help. Or you could need a stronger pain killer. So many people are dismissed by medical professionals when they complain about painful periods, but there are options.

If someone does experience debilitating pain during their periods that can’t be treated or isn’t currently being treated, it should be taken seriously. Employers should allow for paid sick days for period pain. Whether it is untreated endometriosis or the uterus is just a jerk, I want to emphasize how horrible this pain can be and that people should not be expected to go to work or school or function as normal when they are in this much pain. It is completely reasonable to lie on the couch with a hot water bottle all day.

So what about pregnancy? In the last episode, Love is Blind and Birth Control is Complicated, I talked about how you can only get pregnant when the sperm can reach the egg after ovulation. People who want to get pregnant or avoid pregnancy may have the understanding that you can get pregnant any time you have sex, but it isn’t true. The egg is only viable for about 24 hours, but sperm can live approximately 3-5 days in the uterus or fallopian tubes, so that gives a window of time before ovulation that would still put you at risk for pregnancy. And, there’s some evidence that sperm can live up to 9 days! Basically once your period is done and until you ovulate, you may be at risk for pregnancy if you are having unprotected penis-in-vagina sex. On the flip side, if you are trying to get pregnant, you want to have sex close to ovulation! And then after ovulation, you have 2-3 weeks of freedom from pregnancy!

Conclusion

So those are the major myths and misconceptions I wanted to address about periods and the menstrual cycle. I hope you enjoyed your crash course on the menstrual cycle. I think it is such an important thing to understand whether you have a period yourself or not. And for as much as talk about sex has become more public over the past few decades... talking about menstruation still hasn’t permeated our culture.

The more we can learn and talk about periods, the more we can challenge taboos and empower people with knowledge about their bodies. Shame about our bodies is not helpful, so I always aim to help people feel more comfortable about their bodies and all of the wacky biological stuff going on! Periods are normal, and it’s ok to talk about them!

On the next episode, I will answer your questions about ADHD and the menstrual cycle, premenstrual dysphoric disorder, periods on the pill, and more!

That's all for this episode. If you have any feedback or peer review of this episode, I am always excited to hear from you. You can send me a voice memo recorded on your phone or just a written email to doweknowthings@gmail.com. You can get me in Instagram @doweknowthings and you can click the link in the show notes to submit questions anonymously.

You can find a script for this episode with references and extra info on the website at doweknowthings.com.

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I am Lisa Dawn Hamilton. You can find me on Instagram @doweknowthings and you can email me at doweknowthings@gmail.com

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References