



# **WOMEN & GIRLS HEALTH AND WELLNESS**

**Menstrual Health & Cycle**

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# WHAT IS THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE?

A menstrual cycle is the length of time from the start of one period to the start of the next period. Day one of the cycle is the first day of bleeding. This bleeding is known as a period, menstruation or menses. Periods are part of the menstrual cycle where, due to changes in hormone levels in the body, the uterus (found in the lower abdomen) lining sheds, and blood and some uterus tissue flows down the cervix and out of the vagina.

**MENSTRUATION IS NORMAL AND HAVING A MENSTRUAL CYCLE IS A SIGN OF HEALTH FOR MOST MENSTRUATING WOMEN**

## What is menstrual health?

Having good menstrual health has been described as having good physical, mental, and social wellbeing in relation to the menstrual cycle.

In order to have good menstrual health, menstruating women need to:



HAVE ACCESS TO APPROPRIATE PERIOD PRODUCTS AND FACILITIES.



HAVE APPROPRIATE EDUCATION AND UNDERSTAND WHAT IS NORMAL AND WHAT'S NOT.



BE ABLE TO ACCESS TIMELY TREATMENT IF NECESSARY.  
EDUCATION IS KEY TO BEING ABLE TO SEEK HELP.



EXPERIENCE PERIOD POSITIVE ENVIRONMENTS WHERE PERIODS CAN BE DISCUSSED WITHOUT SECRECY OR SHAME.

# WHAT'S NORMAL AND WHAT'S NOT?

## What's the length of the menstrual cycle?

By the third year of having periods most menstrual cycles are on average 28 days, but between 21 – 35 days is normal. If a female consistently has a menstrual cycle shorter than 21 days or more than 35 days or has had no periods for 3 months or more, they should check with a doctor.

## What's the length of the period?

The average period lasts about 5 days, but this can vary between 3-7 days. If bleeding is less than 2 days or greater than 7 days then speak to a doctor.

## How much should I bleed?

Using 3 to 6 'regular' pads or tampons per day (or up to 16 fully soaked 'regular' pads or tampons) throughout the duration of a period is normal. Excessive bleeding includes: changing period products every 1–2 hours, particularly if bleeding lasts more than 7 days or needing to use 2 period products at one time (e.g. pad and tampon), frequently leaking through period products, passing clots the size of 10p coin.

### CRAMPS

"Slight cramps, but ... they only last about an hour and they're bearable."

### FEAR OF LEAKING

"I think it's always in the back of your mind that you're on your period, especially if you got it at the same time as playing for Scotland, you're obviously in white shorts and stuff. It's a big impact for some people, but it's always just in the back of your mind."

## What are the menstrual cycle related symptoms?

Physical and mental menstrual cycle symptoms are very common. Many people use the term Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS) to describe the symptoms they experience in the time leading up to a period and the first couple of days of a period. However, in reality different symptoms (good and bad) can occur across the menstrual cycle.

Experiences of the menstrual cycle are very individual. That's why empathy is key to helping menstruating people. One person might have very few and mild symptoms and other people might have a number of symptoms and may struggle to manage them.

There are lots of different symptoms. These include: abdominal pain, back pain, bloating, fatigue, breast pain, agitation, changes in appetite, trouble sleeping, feeling emotional, changes in bowel habits and function, changes in motivation, coordination, sickness and nausea.

### FEAR OF LEAKING

"I'd say it's a bit of a distraction from training, just in the sense of fear from flooding through."

## How does the menstrual cycle affect your game performance?

**83.5% – 93%**

of rugby players report menstrual cycle or menstruation-related symptoms.

**Between 40-85%**

of athletes say that these symptoms can negatively affect their training or competition performance in some way.

Athletes tend to feel that the biggest negative impact can be in the few days leading up to their period and the first few days of their menstrual cycle. However, experiences are individual and following the management strategies can help!

### CRAMPS

“Sometimes I’ll just be kind of doubled over with pain and then if it’s really bad I can’t, I won’t train. I’ll take the day off training.”

## Track your cycle

Although positive experiences are less well-reported, athletes who track their cycle may find times where they can use their cycle to their advantage. You may be more motivated, have more energy, recover more quickly from training at certain times... use this as your superpower!

## Be aware

Beware of what you read, see or hear in the media or what social media influencers tell you about only doing certain activities or feeling a certain way at a certain part of your cycle. Remember, track your own cycle to know what’s normal for you.

### BAD PERIODS

“When I have a bad period, once every couple of months or so, it can stop me from completing a high intensity session. Other sessions will not be as productive sometimes, although rarely not completed due to cramping and pain.”

# WHAT CAN I DO AS A RUGBY PLAYER TO HELP MY CYCLE AND PERFORM AT MY BEST?



Cycle length



Bleeding length



Heaviness of bleeding



Symptoms throughout  
(both positive and negative)



Any performance changes



Stress



Sleep



Travel



Changes in diet



Rugby training

## Track your cycle

Tracking your cycle and logging symptoms will help you learn about your cycle.

## What should I track?

Complete for a minimum of 3 months cycles to see if there is a 'pattern' for you;

- Do you feel stronger at a certain point in your cycle?
- Do you need to be proactive with sleep if feeling more tired than usual?
- Has your cycle changed, become irregular or stopped and you need to seek advice?

## Prepare

Carry period products with you or ask for products. Why not have a conversation with your club about how they could be supportive with this?

## Pre-empt and be proactive

Try the following lifestyle advice and management strategies to reduce unwanted symptoms.

### CRAMPS

"Slight cramps, but ... they only last about an hour and they're bearable."

# LIFESTYLE ADVICE AND MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE UNWANTED SYMPTOMS

## Exercise and physical activity

Some people can continue their normal exercise or training regimes before and during their period, whilst others may need to change it. Scientific studies have shown that physical activity, stretching and exercise (e.g. yoga, pilates, walking, aerobic exercise) can help to reduce most physical and mental symptoms. So, you might not feel like going to rugby training, but it may actually help you feel better! Speak to your coach if you feel you need to alter what you do in a session.

## Eating a well-balanced diet

A well-balanced diet will help give you more energy, help with bloating, cravings, headaches and may reduce inflammation and therefore pain. Don't eat too many processed high fat foods such as takeaways, sugary drinks, crisps, chocolate, and cake. Try to eat 5 portions of fruit or vegetables every day, especially when menstruating. Make sure you know the size of 'a portion' for each food as there will be differences.

## Have good sleep habit

Good quality sleep is needed for good emotional and physical health and to be at your best for matches, training and other work or social activities you enjoy. Sleep can help most menstrual related symptoms e.g. reducing feelings of tiredness, irritability, anxiety, cravings, changes in appetite, and concentration.

### Improve sleep length and quality by:

- In the week before your period you may need more sleep.
- Go to bed at the same time each night (unless you need more sleep before or during your period).
- Starting the day with sunlight.
- Exercising during the day or early evening.
- Limiting caffeine, especially in the afternoon and evening.
- Limiting screen time in the evening and especially one hour before bed.
- Ensuring your room is cool, dark and quiet.

### EXERCISE

"If I'm on my period, if my tummy is crampy and sore, sometimes if I go into exercise that can make it a bit better."

"Don't get caught 'off-side', track and understand your cycle and gain an 'advantage'"

## Manage stress

The menstrual cycle can become longer or shorter, periods may stop altogether, or symptoms can be worse if your body is under too much physical or emotional stress. This includes not allowing enough recovery time between training sessions and not refuelling enough after matches and training.

What things help with reducing stress? Exercising (you've got that one ticked!), eating a well-balanced diet, improving sleep habits, planning for times you might not be as productive during your cycle, socialising, breathing exercises or meditation, mindfulness... Work to discover what works for you!

## Be kind to yourself!

Understanding the menstrual cycle, periods, and the different symptoms that you might experience can help you understand why you might be feeling the way you do. Tracking your cycle can help menstruating people understand when they are experiencing certain symptoms and understand why they might be feeling the way you do. Understanding that the feelings will pass is sometimes enough!

# WHAT CAN I DO AS A COACH, PHYSIO OR CLUB VOLUNTEER TO SUPPORT RUGBY ATHLETES?



Simple changes in practices, organisation and facilities management could make your club and clubhouse become a more period positive environment, allowing your players to thrive and contribute towards performing at their best.

## Education, awareness & approachability

Research suggests that coaches and practitioners feel they could do with more menstrual cycle education. You are taking the right steps by engaging with this! Do not underestimate the difference more education, awareness and understanding can have on your players' experiences. Having menstrual cycle knowledge makes it easier to discuss and communicate about the menstrual cycle with players - just like you would discuss any other aspect that can affect performance. The more you talk about it, the more you normalise the conversation. Always be aware of the kind of language you use in any conversation.

## Access to period products and spare kit

Don't make a lack of access to period products a barrier to rugby participation. Period poverty is a real issue within the UK. In a survey in 2017, 10% of girls in the UK were unable to afford period products. Don't assume your players can afford products.

People who menstruate can be 'caught short' if their periods arrive before they expect or are heavier than they anticipate.

Rugby athletes tell us that they are fearful of leaking, which results in players feeling distracted and not fully concentrating on the task of playing or training.

## Things you can do

Supply period products in your club house and ensure there is an 'away kit' with period products and spare kit available when playing away from home. Ensure period products in your club are easily accessible (young people don't want to ask for products), there are a range of products and absorbencies available, and they are frequently replenished. Ensure there are spare items of underwear available and spare shorts, training kit for home and away games. If there is no budget for these, why not ask players to hand in playing kit they have outgrown or no longer use? Ask your rugby athletes what products they use and need!

## Toilets and changing facilities

Toilets should have appropriate bins available within the cubicles where people need to change products. Ideally there should be a sink within the cubicles if players need to rinse a menstrual cup.

Give rugby athletes choice (where you can) around white and especially light-coloured shorts: Research shows that many rugby athletes have a fear of leaking and often have concerns about blood showing through onto shorts and light-coloured shorts.

Many clubs and sports are moving away from light coloured bottoms for girls and women's sports for this reason.

The important point is giving athletes the choice and planning accordingly.



# REFERENCES & MORE INFORMATION

## Research Study References

British Journal of Sports Medicine (BMJ) How the menstrual cycle and menstruation affect sporting performance: experiences and perceptions of elite female rugby players.

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Taylor & Francis Online Prevalence of hormonal contraceptive use and reported side effects of the menstrual cycle and hormonal contraceptive use in powerlifting and rugby.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00913847.2021.2024774>

## For more information:

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/periods/](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/periods/)

[www.endometriosis-uk.org/](http://www.endometriosis-uk.org/)

## About the Author

Menstrual Health toolkit is published by England Rugby. It is based on material written by Dr Laura Forrest from the University of the West of Scotland and with the support of The Royal Society of Edinburgh. Dr Laura Forrest is a Senior Lecturer in Sport and Exercise Science with a research focus of menstrual health in sport and education.

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