

Awareness about Menstrual Cycle, Menstrual Hygiene and Menstrual Health

Abstract

Menstruation is a natural process in age group of 9 to 15 years old girls. But it is considered as unclean or dirty in India. Due to lack of knowledge and awareness about menstruation, the situation becomes worse for girls. So if the right knowledge on menstrual hygiene and menstrual health is given to the girls on right time, they will be the less sufferers. Nowadays, girls have developed their own personal strategies to handle this period of time. Globally, these strategies vary greatly due to the personal preferences, education status, availability of resources, economic status, cultural traditions and beliefs, and knowledge about menstruation. Good management of menstrual hygiene should obviously include safe and sanitary disposal. In this paper, the main focus is on the needs of menstrual hygiene, water and sanitation, solid waste management and health management. Governments, multinational organizations, and charities have commenced the distribution of sanitary products to address current deficits in girls' menstrual management.

Keywords: Menstrual Health; Menstrual Hygiene; Adolescent Girls; Education; Reproductive Health; Sanitary Products.

Introduction

According to World Health Organization, a person aged 10–19 years is considered as an adolescent. Some physical, psychological, and biological changes occur during the period between the childhood and adulthood. This is the time when special attention is required for girls because a girl child is going to be ready now in phase of her reproductive period. The first menstruation (menarche) occurs between 9 and 15 years with a mean of 13 years. The menstrual cycle has three phases, that is, follicular phase (proliferative), ovulation phase, and luteal phase (secretory). Menstruation is regulated by hormones; in this process, endometrium, lining of uterus, gradually thickens and sheds off and causes bleeding that normally last for 3–5 days and occasionally up to 7 days. In addition to blood, menstrual fluid contains mucus and vaginal secretions. The menstrual flow varies from female to female and may be more or less at the beginning of menses or may change throughout the cycle. The colour of the menstrual fluid varies between red, bright red, and dark brown to black. Menstrual fluid may or may not have unpleasant odour especially when it comes in contact with air.

During menstruation, Hygiene-related practices of girls are very important because it has a health impact. The interplay of socio-economic status, menstrual hygiene practices and reproductive tract infections (RTI) are noticeable. Many girls are sufferers of RTI and its problem and often the infection is transmitted to the young of the pregnant mother.

Actually girls are ignorant about menstruation before menarche. But they should be aware about menstruation, for this, the mother should be the main informant at this tender age, which is an important event at the threshold of adolescence. The reason is poor literacy and socio-economic status of mothers. The mother has to talk to her daughter regarding the significance, hygienic practices and a healthy attitude towards menstruation. This will be a good practice in maintaining a healthy reproductive tract for each and every girl child who, after she becomes a mother, percolates the healthy message to her female children. Other sources of information are relatives, friends, teachers, books and mass media. It is observed that some girls believe it to be a physiological process, whereas some believe that menstruation is not a natural process.

Most of the girls do not know about the source of menstrual bleeding and more than half of the girls are ignorant about the use of sanitary pads during menstruation. This happens due to poor literacy level of mothers or absence of proper health education programmes in schools,



Poonam Bajpai

Assistant Professor,
Deptt. of Mathematics,
MBP Govt.PG College,
Ashiana, Lucknow

which should focus on menstrual hygiene, among girls. The majority of the girls favour cloth pieces rather than sanitary pads as menstrual absorbent. It is observed that the usual practice is to wash the cloth with soap after use and keep it at some secret place till the next menstrual period. To keep the cloth away from prying eyes, these are sometimes hidden in unhygienic places.

Privacy for washing, changing or cleaning purpose is something very important for proper menstrual hygiene. Regarding the method of disposal of the used material, most of the girls reuse cloth pieces and girls properly dispose the used material. Improper disposal of the sanitary pad can lead to various problems like Salmonella, Staphylococcus, HIV and pathogens that cause Hepatitis B and C and tetanus. Incinerating these napkins is the only way of getting rid of these problems.

Some schoolgirls have the different aspects of personal hygiene, were generally found to be poor, such as not changing pads regularly or at night and not bathing during menstruation. Different restrictions were practiced by most of the girls, possibly due to their ignorance and false perceptions regarding menstruation.

Aim of the Study

1. To Increase awareness on Menstrual Hygiene among adolescent girls and their parents.
2. To improve access to and use of high quality sanitary napkins to get good health.
3. To ensure safe disposal of Sanitary Napkins in an environmentally friendly manner.
4. To spread the information regarding menstrual cycle, menstrual hygiene and health by formal or informal education.

Cultural Beliefs and Restrictions

Menstrual hygiene practices were affected by cultural norms, parental influence, personal preferences, economic status, and socioeconomic pressures. Menstrual beliefs refer to misconceptions and attitudes towards menstruation within a given culture or religion. Menstrual beliefs, knowledge, and practices were all interrelated to the menstrual hygiene management. By reviewing literature and articles published in journals and reports available on the Internet, we found many cultural and religious beliefs followed by people regarding menstruation. These norms were the barriers in the path of good menstrual hygiene practices. Many women were experiencing restrictions on cooking, work activities, sexual intercourse, bathing, worshipping, and eating certain foods. These restrictions were due to the overall perception of the people regarding menstruation as they consider it dirty and polluting.

In some parts of the country there were restrictions on bathing and a taboo against burial of bloodied menstrual cloth. Cloths should first be washed and then buried or reused. Washing and drying thought to be done secretly or in a hidden corner so that it cannot be seen by others. It was also believed that menstrual fluids may be misused for black magic, so women should wash the wrapper/cloth wore during menses only at night when others were asleep. Menstrual flow was seen as dirty,

polluting, and shameful, so women hide menstrual cloths for fear of being cursed. In similar findings, it was believed that menstrual waste was linked to witchcraft and danger, so it must be buried unless witches go after human blood and find the menstrual wrapper/cloth and destroy the women by causing infertility. From all these beliefs, it was clear that education, plays a key role in menstruation hygiene, management. By educating both men and women regarding menstruation, we can overcome these false beliefs and taboos.

Due to cultural expectations and restrictions many girls were not adequately informed about the realities of menstruation. As a result, they feel subnormal, diseased, or traumatized. Unprepared girls were frightened, confused, and feel embarrassed by menarche likely to develop negative attitudes towards menstruation. Even touching of menstruating women was considered toxic, they were prohibited from cooking and from taking certain foods like pickle. These prohibitions are more in the rural areas than in the urban areas. They were also not allowed to participate in religious activities or to contact religious articles. Menstruating girls are also not allowed to bath and wash hair, as it is believed to impede blood flow.

Sanitary Pads and The Global Impact

The sanitary protection pad like menstrual cups, organic cloth pads, tampons, bamboo fibre pads, banana fibre Pads, water hyacinth pads and disposable pads is based on personal choice and availability in local market. As per a study, a maximum of 60% of 355 million Indian women have been found to use the disposable sanitary pads and the figure ranges to as low as 13%.

Some of the well-known brands are available in India. The government has launched low price, biodegradable sanitary napkins under 'Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya Jan Aushadhi Kedra' in the brand name 'Suidha'. Some indigenous game changers have taken initiative to promote sustainable menstrual products. With government aid, Eco Femme, based out of Auroville, Puducherry has set up SHGs, are running several programs Pad for Pad, pads for sisters etc., customized programmes to provide Training for Trainers, Adult Education, seminars and workshops successfully. Jaioni, the brand of the brainchild of Gayathri Subramanian is providing the cloth pads in multiple variants. Saukhyam, the organization founded by Vasanthi Gopalan, a Thrissur-based NGO has taken upon itself to engage senior citizens to make toxin free pads. Women are also being trained in Uttar Pradesh, Telangana, Maharashtra, Chattisgarh, Uttarakhand and West Bengal to make these pads. Akabar innovations made low cost eco-friendly absorbents under the brand name Anandi Pads, Vatsalaya Foundation is manufacturing napkins under the name Sakhi using wood pulp, Saathi Pads come up with idea of completely biodegradable pads, are made up of waste banana fibre. Project Baala, they not only educate about health and hygiene but also give a menstrual kit to girls and women.

A research guide by Human Rights Watch and Wash United explains that when women and girls cannot manage their menstrual hygiene, it can negatively impact the extent to which they enjoy certain rights.

Menstrual Hygiene Schemes

Government of India is supporting the Menstrual Hygiene Scheme to concentrate on the need of menstrual hygiene among adolescent girls residing primarily in rural areas. Under this Scheme, Funds are provided to States/UTs through National Health Mission for decentralized procurement of sanitary napkins packs for provision primarily to rural adolescent girls at subsidized rates as per proposals received from the States and UTs in their Programme Implementation Plans. This scheme is about increasing awareness, improving access to and use of high quality sanitary napkins, ensuring safe disposal of sanitary napkins in an environmentally friendly manner, provision of funds to Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) s to hold monthly meeting with adolescents to discuss issues related to menstrual hygiene.

The ministry of Health and Family Welfare launched Freeday Pad Scheme. In 2014, the Union government launched the Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram, aimed at improving the health and hygiene. Union government also launched the SABLA scheme. Under Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, menstrual hygiene practices, skill development and setting up sanitary napkin dispensers and incinerators in schools and public toilets are main components.

The sanitary pad vending machines are providing sanitary napkins to girls free of cost, easy to operate, requires low maintenance and comes with an incinerator unit to dispose the sanitary napkins.

Information Education and Communication Material

Using a 360 degree approach to create awareness among adolescent girls, IEC material has been developed about safe & hygienic menstrual health practices including audio-video and reading materials for adolescent girls and job-aids for ASHAs and other field level functionaries for communicating with adolescent girls. "Mythri", a Sanskrit name, meaning friend (female) is an Animated video created to impart awareness on Menstrual Hygiene for adolescent girls. The contents of the awareness video has been put together by visiting government schools, especially in rural Karnataka, and interacting with adolescent girls, teachers and parents on the menstrual needs, concerns and questions of adolescents. Across the country, ASHAs are trained and play an important role in promotion of use and distribution of the sanitary napkins.

Under the Ministry of Health, Department of Health Research, is involved in assessment of all environment friendly, newer, alternative menstrual hygiene products to look into their safety and acceptability features. For promotion of menstrual hygiene, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has been implementing this scheme among adolescent girls in the age group of 10-19

years primarily in rural areas as part of the Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram.

Conclusion

The study leads to conclude that proper menstrual hygiene and correct perceptions and beliefs can protect the womenfolk from this suffering. Before bringing any change in menstrual practices, the girls should be educated through formal and informal modes of education like television programmes, compulsory sex education, school nurses/health personnel in school curriculum and knowledgeable parents, so that her received education would indirectly wipe away the age-old wrong ideas and make her feel free to discuss menstrual matters including cleaner practices without any hesitation.

All mothers should be taught to break their inhibitions about discussing with their daughters regarding menstruation much before the age of menarche.

To maintain the standard of hygiene, the basic facilities such as water, bathroom and privacy is required. Menstrual products are essential in every woman's life to manage their periods with dignity only by making it available at affordable prices without harming the environment.

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