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Authors: Dana Smiles and Marni Sommer
Stories by: Girls of Ethiopia
Translator: Amare Mamo
Illustrator: Yared Olivelli
Layout and Design: Meskerem Eshetu @ Shama Books, P.O. Box 57, Addis Ababa
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Puberty starts when extra amounts of chemicals called “hormones” begin to be produced in the body. These hormones lead to changes in the body.

Apart from causing physical changes, the hormones cause emotional changes too. So a growing girl may feel happy one moment, and angry, sad or confused the next moment.
Puberty is the time when girls begin to produce eggs, and boys begin to produce sperm.

It is the time when we develop into young women and men.

It is a very special time, and it is our bodies’ way of maturing so that one day we can have children and start our own families. Even though girls’ bodies start having the ability to have children, it does not mean that girls are ready to have children.

When does puberty begin and how long does it take?

Changes take place in girls and boys at different times. Generally changes start earlier for girls than for boys.

Some start before the age of 10, while others start after age 14.

For some girls, changes may take place in one year or less. In others, they can take as long as six years.
What are the physical changes that take place in girls?

A girl’s breasts start to grow and her hips get wider. Hair starts to grow under her arms. Hair grows in her pubic area. She starts to menstruate (have her period or bleed every month).

What is menstruation?

Menstruation means that a girl’s body is growing up, and is preparing for the future when she might get pregnant and have a baby.

During menstruation, the lining of the uterus comes out along with blood through the vagina. Bleeding usually lasts 4-7 days and usually happens every month. Monthly bleeding is not something to be scared of because it is perfectly normal.
Most girls have their first period between the ages of 11 to 14. Some girls start as early as 8, and some at 17 or older.

The time from the first day of your period (when bleeding starts) to the first day of your next period is usually 28 days (one month), but can range from 21-35 days. For many years after a girl starts having her period, she may not get her period every month. This is normal.

When a girl has her period, she should wash at least twice a day with soap and water in the area around the vagina.

She can use cotton cloth or sanitary pads to soak up the blood. These should be changed every few hours.

If a girl is going to school, she should take an extra cloth, or sanitary pad in a plastic bag so that she can change after a few hours.

If a girl has a blood stain on her uniform in school, she can tie a scarf or sweater around her waist, and ask a friend or a teacher to help.
Although menstruation means a girl is biologically able to have a baby, girls are not advised to have a baby until they are over 18 years old.

This is because other changes in her body are still taking place. Having a baby when your body is not ready can cause many health problems for a girl and her baby.

If a girl who has her period every month misses a period, it may mean that she is pregnant. But girls can also miss periods if they are feeling stress, if they become too thin, or if they have been traveling.

*Does having a period hurt?*

Some girls do not feel pain when they have their period, some have slight pains below their naval and in their lower back and some have a lot of pain and may need to take pain killer medicine.

Usually the pain is not very bad and does not last long.

The pains are called “cramps” because they are caused by the muscles of the uterus contracting.

It is the contraction that pushes out the lining of the uterus each month.
What is PMS?

PMS is short for pre-menstrual syndrome. Not all girls get this, but many do for a few days before they start their period.

This is because changes in the level of hormones in a girl’s body can affect her moods.

Some girls feel sad. Others feel irritable, and get angry for no real reason.

Some girls’ breasts feel swollen and sore. This is all normal and natural and should not worry you.

Talk to your mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunts, female teachers, or older women in your community.

When you have your period, some discomfort is normal, but if you have too much pain, you may need medication so talk to an older woman to ask her advice.

Normally when you have your period, you may need to change your cloth or pads 3-4 times a day. If you need to change more times, you may be bleeding too much so ask an older woman, a nurse, or doctor for advice.
The first time I menstruated, I had stomach cramps and I was very shocked! It lasted for four days. I told my friend that I had started menstruating because my mother did not tell me about it before. This is because my mother never learned about it and it is very taboo. Mothers do not usually talk about menstruation or puberty with their daughters. Instead we tell our friends our secrets. Although I was in school and shocked, I still told my friend and asked the teacher for permission to go home. I learned about menstruation in school, but I was still shocked! I went home, hid from my mother, and tore an old scarf. I used this to manage my menstruation. I couldn’t attend class because I was sick. I told my biology teacher who I was close to and he told me to go home and rest. I did not go to class for three days. My advice to my younger sisters is that menstruation is natural and happens to girls from age 9-17. At this age, they should be ready by preparing the materials to use without being shocked or stressed. They should also know that it is normal. Mothers should discuss this issue with their daughters. They should discuss menstruation at different times and should not think that it is bad. Girls should share what they learn in school and from friends with their mothers and explain everything. They should be very close like a hand and glove. It should not be considered embarrassing and taboo. Girls can buy modern sanitary pads from shops and use them. To be prepared, we can keep them in our bags whenever we go out. If we have stomach cramps we can find painkillers by going to the health station. We can prevent body odor by keeping our personal hygiene.
When I first started to menstruate, I did not know what it was. When I was 16 years old my menstruation came suddenly when I was working on the farm with my father. I was very shocked and embarrassed. I was even too embarrassed to tell my mother. I did not tell anyone the first day. The second day the blood came again. I was very embarrassed but I called my mom. I said, “Mom I want to tell you something.” I was very afraid to tell her but I told her. My mom smiled and asked “Why are you shy, I am your mom! This is something that all women experience. You are not the first girl to menstruate.” I told this to my elder sister. She told me to wear underpants and to use a clean piece of cloth. She also said that it would only last for a few days. I was very happy when she told me this. The first time I menstruated I was very shocked because I had never experienced this type of thing before. I would like to tell my younger sisters that menstruation is a gift from God only for women. I would like to tell them that menstruation happens to all women: poor, rich, young, old, white, brown, black, fat, thin, short or tall. It happens to all women! We have to accept it as a gift from God. I accepted this because it is natural. I will teach younger girls and give them advice about the things that they should use to manage menstruation. For example, that they should wear underpants and put a clean piece of cloth or a sanitary pad inside of them.
The first time I started menstruating I was very shocked! I had stomach cramps and I told my father. He told me that this is natural, and that I should not be shocked. I was shocked because I did not know how to manage menstruation. I did not know anything about menstruation. I had not even heard other people talking about it. I asked my father to take me to the clinic. The next morning, when I woke up and went to the bathroom, I saw blood. I was very shocked! I told my sister and my father. They told me it is called menstruation. My elder sister told me everything that I should do. She told me that she uses sanitary pads and told me to use sanitary pads as well. My sister gave me her sanitary pads to use. This is how I managed my first menstruation. I was very embarrassed when I menstruated and used sanitary pads. I was afraid to leave the house. I thought people would stare at me and insult me. Whenever I menstruated, I did not go outside of the house. I didn’t even go to school. At that time, this affected everything in my life. When I stopped going to school my sister and my father advised against this. They told me I am not the only girl who menstruates. They also told me that this is a sign of becoming a woman and I should not worry. I took their advice and stopped being afraid. I even gave the same advice to my friends. I would like younger girls to know that they should not be afraid of menstruation. They shouldn’t be shocked, upset, or embarrassed. It is a sign of being a woman.
When I first menstruated I was very shocked. I had a headache, stomach cramps, and back pain. I was very confused, so I told my mother. My mother told me that menstruation is natural and that I should not be shocked. She told me to put pieces of cloth in my underpants. I then told my girl friend because when I was walking with her I was afraid that I might get stained. I started putting pieces of cloth in my underpants just like my mother advised me. I have a lot of advice for younger girls. First, girls should not be shocked or afraid when they start menstruating because it is something natural that happens to all girls when they grow to a woman. Second, I would like to tell younger girls to tell their mother or girlfriends when they begin to menstruate and to get the appropriate advice. Third, girls living in a rural area can use pieces of cloth in their underpants if sanitary pads are not available. If a girl is living in a town or city, I will advise her to use sanitary pads.
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Answering the “how to” questions!

How to manage your first period?

- Talk to your elders…your mother, sister, aunt, grandmother, female friend, or an older woman in your community…they will give you good advice.
- Do not feel afraid…it can be scary to see the blood on your underpants…but it is normal and natural.
- If you are at school…tell a female teacher or a fellow female student…they will help you.
- Feel proud…your body is developing into a young woman!

How to capture the blood?

- Place a folded piece of cloth or a sanitary pad in your underpants.
- Change the cloth/pad every 2 to 3 hours or if you think that the blood flow is getting heavy.

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How to capture the blood?

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Change the cloth/pad every 2 to 3 hours or if you think that the blood flow is getting heavy.
How to dispose of the cloth/pad?

- If you are using a pad, wrap it in paper so it is a clean package and drop it in the latrine or put it into the dustbin so it can be burned/thrown away later.
- If you are using a cloth, put it into a plastic bag until you can wash it with hot water and soap, and dry it in the sunshine.

How to keep yourself clean during your period?

- Every day (morning and evening) wash your pubic area with soap and water.
- Keep unused cloths and pads clean (wrapped in paper or plastic bag) to use later.
- Pat the area dry with a clean cloth, and put a fresh cloth or pad in your underpants.

How to manage the stomach pain from your period?

- You can put a hot water bottle on your stomach area when you are resting.
- You can try to do some exercises and keep your body active.
- You can take 1-2 pain killer tablets every 4 to 6 hours on the most painful days. You can drink a hot cup of water, tea, or oatmeal.

How to keep «the cloth» clean?

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Is it normal if I do not get my period every month?
Yes, when girls’ bodies are developing, the period is often not regular and can skip months.

Is it normal to get your period 5 days one time, 6 days another time, and 4 days another time?
Yes, every girl’s period is different and will last different numbers of days as she is growing up.

Is it normal if you get your period on a different day each month?
Yes, a typical menstrual cycle is 28 days but it can range between 21 and 35 days depending on the girl.

Is it normal if I get my period for 3 days and my friend gets her period for 5 days?
Yes, the average length of a menstrual period is 5 days but it can range from 2 to 7 days.

Is it normal to get breast pains when you are growing up?
Yes, as a girl’s body is developing, many inside changes are happening and small pains are natural.

Is it normal that boys do not get periods?
Yes, boys’ bodies are different inside and they cannot have babies. So they do not get a period.

Is it normal to feel shy when you have your period?
Yes, many girls feel shy because they are not used to managing their period. This is normal and as you get older, you will feel less shy.
Is it normal if some girls get angry easily when they have their period?
Yes, the hormones that are moving in a girl’s body when she has her period can cause mood swings.

Is it normal if a girl gets her period when she is young, such as age 9, 10, or 11?
Yes, there are a wide range of ages when girls can get their period, from 8 or 9 up until 17 or 18 years of age.

Is it normal that sometimes a girl will get clots coming out with her period?
Yes, thick clumps of blood in your period are normal and are called “clots.” They are more frequent when you have been lying down, so you may see more when you wake up in the morning.

Is it normal to get pimples during your period?
Yes, many girls and women will get pimples just before or during their period.

Is it normal to get water-like or white discharge right before or after your period?
Yes, once a girl’s body starts to develop, having some clear or milky-white discharge is normal. During her period, the menstrual blood can be different colors, including bright red, light pink or even more brown in color.

Is it normal to get stomach pain during your period?
Yes, “cramps” are pains in the lower abdomen that may happen during or just before your period. Small or medium pain is normal but if the pain is very bad, you might want to see a doctor or nurse for medicine.
Is it true or false?

When you grow up you will stop having stomach pain (cramps) during your period. 

False

On average, it takes 3-4 years for a girls’ breasts to fully develop.

True

If you get married or become pregnant, you will stop having stomach pain.

False

You can go to school or participate in any sports during your period.

True

Bathing while menstruating will make the menstrual blood heavier.

False

Eating nutritious food such as vegetables will cause a girl to menstruate early or will cause the menstrual blood to be heavy.

False

If a girl gets her period at a young age, it is because she has been having sexual relations.

False

Speaking with a man while menstruating will make the menstrual blood heavier.

False
Puberty Changes

- Your skin makes more oils, so you may get pimples.
- Your nipples will get darker in color.
- Hair will grow under your arms and in your pubic area.
- Sweat glands under your arms will be more active so you will smell more like an adult.
- Your breasts will grow larger and be more sensitive.
- Your hips will become wider.

Keeping a Menstrual Calendar

To help you keep track of your period, here is an example of a calendar you can draw and use.

When you get your period:

- Each time you get your period, circle the date it starts, and draw an X through each day that the bleeding continues.

Remember, during puberty girls can have irregular periods!
Menstrual Myths….True or False?

Eating spicy food will cause a girl to reach puberty at an early age and will make the menstrual flow heavier.
False

Drinking local alcoholic beverages such as tela, tej, areke or gin will make the menstrual flow heavier or cause menstruation to start at an early age.
False

Consuming hot food and drinks while you have your period will make the menstrual flow heavier or cause a girl to reach puberty at an early age.
False

Girls can get pregnant if they have sex while menstruating.
True

Menstrual blood is dirty and will cause health problems if it does not leave the body.
False

Eating sugary food while you have your period can make the menstrual flow heavier.
False

Physical work such as exercise or carrying heavy objects will make the menstrual flow heavier or cause menstruation to start at an early age.
False

Congratulations!!

You have now learned about growing from a girl into a young woman. We hope you feel beautiful, strong, and proud of your body!
This book tells the stories of young Ethiopian girls.