

Breaking Myths

LEVEL 1

Taboos and Myths

What are taboos and myths?

Taboo

Labelled by society as improper or unacceptable.

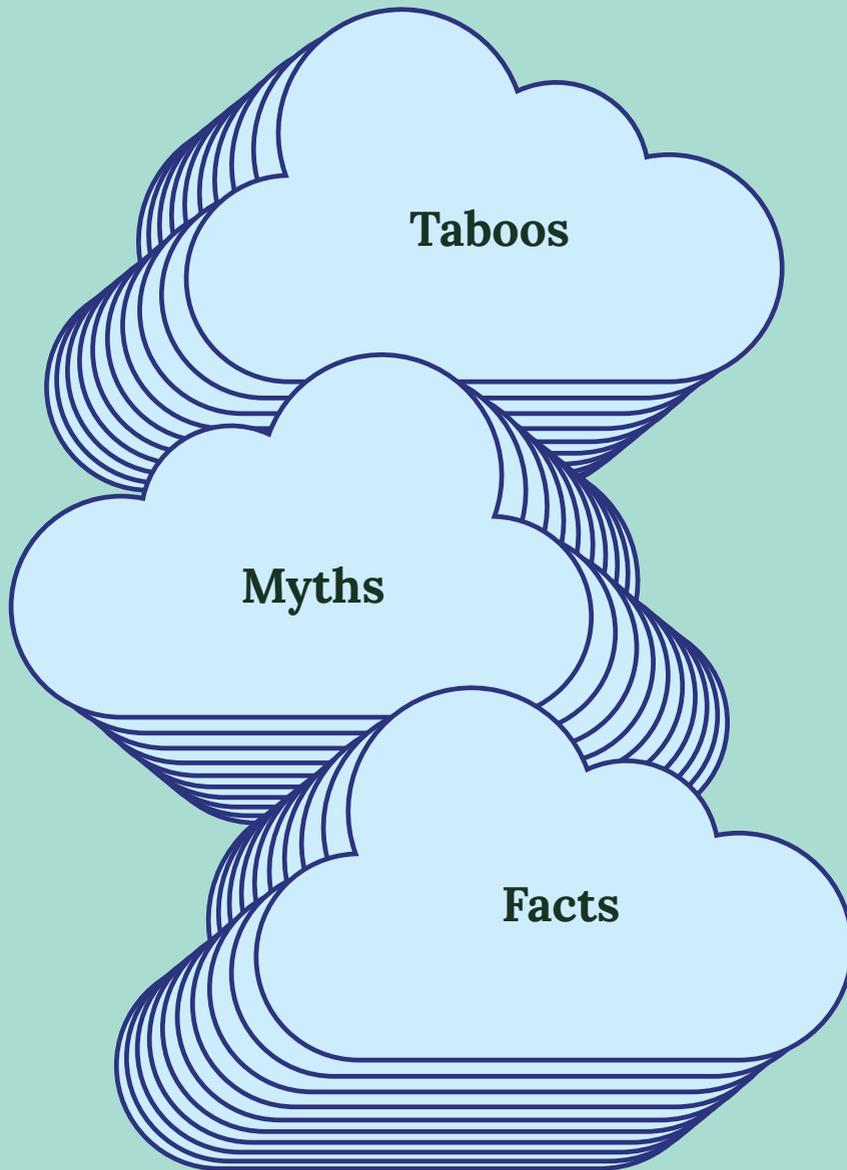
Myth

A widely held but false belief or idea.

Menstruation is something that all female bodies go through, yet it has always been surrounded by taboos and myths that exclude women from many aspects of socio-cultural life.

Taboos about menstruation present in many societies have big impacts on people's emotional state, mentality, lifestyle, and physical health. The challenge of addressing the socio-cultural taboos and beliefs in menstruation is further compounded by the lack of knowledge and understanding of puberty, menstruation, and reproductive health.

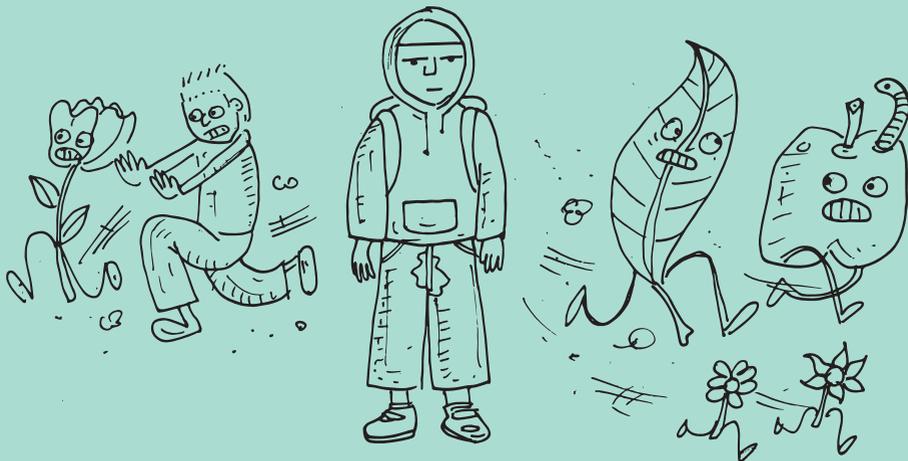
Myths are not all ill-intentioned and were sometimes a form of control that is meant to protect women. For example, *historically* when there were no period products available and wild animals roamed freely, it was likely they would get attacked if they smelt of blood. Therefore, it was for the good of the women to not go outside during their period. Similarly, going into the kitchen or preparing food with no period products could be unhygienic and increase the chance of blood getting into the food. Therefore they may have been told to stay away from the kitchen when menstruating.



The important thing to note is context - many myths arose in a time when there were no period products or ways to manage their period which likely led to myths such as women should not go out during their period or enter the kitchen. For a lot of people now, it is much easier to access products, and therefore, these myths do not apply to current ways of living.

Myths are often prescriptive measures coming from good intentions, however, because they don't have scientific or factual foundations to stand on, they could have negative implications. **The most important thing is to ask yourself if the myth is meant to protect the person menstruating or protect society from you** (e.g. you are impure, therefore you must be separated from others) - the latter being an oppressive issue which should be fought against.

Myths based on superstition are not only incorrect, but can also perpetuate gender-based discrimination and behavioural restrictions on people who menstruate. Believing these myths make it more difficult for people to talk about their periods, and to know whether or not their menstrual cycle is normal and healthy. Superstitions and myths lead to shame, silence, and even poor reproductive health outcomes.



Common Misconceptions

Don't believe everything you hear



Myth

You should sleep separately from others during your period.

Sanitary products should be kept private and covered in paper when purchasing.

PMS and PMDD is all in your head.

Leaking shows that you can't take care of yourself.



Fact

Menstruation is not contagious and causes no harm to anyone else around you.

Buying sanitary products is like buying soap or toilet paper. They are all hygiene products.

PMS and PMDD are medically proven and happen due to hormonal fluctuations.

Some sanitary pads can have poor designs which can shift improperly, leading to blood stains. Not everyone knows when their next period starts, so they sometimes have leaks before they can get a pad.



Myth

Any form of physical activity can disturb the menstrual flow.

Showering or bathing during your period will cause infertility.

You should not touch or go near plants during your period, since they will immediately die.

Enter a kitchen or cook during your period, as it will contaminate the food.

You can hold in your period like pee.

Period blood is blue.



Fact

Exercise and sports can actually help relieve pain.

Showering or bathing doesn't cause infertility. Hot water can actually help relieve cramps and ease muscular tension.

Your period will not harm any plants.

There is no harm in entering the kitchen, eating and drinking, or cooking while menstruating.

You can't hold in your period because the muscle in the urethra used to hold in your pee is non-existent in the vagina.

Contrary to what you see in TV adverts, period blood is red like all other blood.



Myth

An irregular cycle is a sign of infertility.

If you don't start your period before the age of 14, there's something wrong.

You can't get pregnant if you have sex while on your period.

Having menstrual sex is unhealthy for the woman and can kill the man.



Fact

Irregular cycles can be a sign of infertility. But many factors may cause irregularities, such as change in weight, stress and birth control.

The first period usually occurs between the ages of 10 and 14. However, it can occur earlier or later in some cases.

Although unlikely, it's still possible to get pregnant.

Having sex during your period is not at all unhealthy and won't kill anybody.

Two Truths and a Lie

Debunk the myths about periods!

How to play (2 players or more)

One by one, each person says three statements on the topic of menstruation. Two of these statements must be facts, or "truths," and one must be a lie. The other players then try to guess which statement is the lie. Here is an example:



Truth: Exercise and sports can help relieve period pain.



Lie: Bathing during your period will cause infertility.



Truth: A period will not harm any plants.



DEAR BIG SISTERS,

Our primary school has a class that explained to all the girls in our class about period and explained to us it's a part of being a female. We also had a sanitary pad sample each to explore how it captures water. That were the things I can remember. At home, my mom has started to let me know information about period during primary school time earlier than I had period education class at school. My mum would tell me it's normal for girls to have period and don't freak out. Also she told me not to eat icy stuff when having the period because the coldness might clog the blood. And it's a common saying in Chinese medicine, and a lot of girls I know heard the same things from their mothers.

**SUBMISSION BY
ANONYMOUS, 30, CHINA**

Menstrual Blood

Is menstrual blood dirty?

*"YOU CAN'T HAVE A BABY WITHOUT SOMEONE HAVING A PERIOD... TO SAY IT IS UNCLEAN OR UNNATURAL MEANS THE WHOLE OF CIVILISATION IS UNCLEAN AND UNNATURAL."
- NATASHA CHAWLA (HINDU SCHOLAR)*

It's certainly not dirty! Menstrual blood is different from the blood that flows in our veins due to its composition and physical properties. A period is a mixture of blood, uterine tissue, mucus lining, and healthy bacteria that shed when an ovulated egg doesn't get fertilised. This means that it has to be clean enough to be able to **nurture a baby**. A lot of the menstrual stigma and shame stems from the taboo around menstrual blood and the myth that you can hold in your period like pee. The simple sight of blood stains on clothes in public settings have led to people of all genders being humiliated, shamed, and mocked by their peers, which can be traumatising and reinforce period myths. It is time to put a stop to this nonsense and humiliation!

DEAR BIG SISTERS,

I was 13 when I had my first period. And I think I have the best family. Although I wasn't permitted to go to kitchen and temples, my grandmother used to make me understand why is it so. Not only for culture believe but because our body needs rest through this period. This was my period positive story.

*SUBMISSION BY
SWORNIMA, 16, NEPAL*



Question Corner



What do these myths mean to you?

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What are some of the myths you were told? Did these myths affect your actions and beliefs in any way?

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Why do you think these myths exist?

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DEAR BIG SISTERS,



**SUBMISSION BY
SIÂN LEWIS, UK**

DEAR BIG SISTERS,

Every month I hold my own personal event; I menstruate. I tell no one except in emergencies; whispered in hush hurried tones. 'Do you have a tampon I can have?' In private I dash off to curb the flow, mustn't make a mess, no blood must show. Neat, clean woman. All stains must be meticulously washed out; removed with a cocktail of chemicals.

"Can you smell my blood?" Oh the shame!

As a girl I was told that menstruation was a painful curse that affected all womankind and something to be endured. I was horrified by this description and promised myself that this blood was not an affliction but just a bodily function. However, it was harder to get a distance from this cultural appropriation as I learned about not only the pain, but the sudden unpredictable onset and the bloody mess it caused. I learned about the colours of menstrual blood, clotting and flooding.

Women experience menstruation in many different ways, some celebrate a time of slowing down and tuning into the rhythms of their body, others take to their bed with cramps and floods. For many women it is expected to be business as usual as the blood is mopped up by 'new super liquid holding gel' that promises to keep you fresh. Do we have time to allow



menstruation to be the 'wise wound'? Does our predominately patriarchal culture support women in slowing down to take stock of this monthly cycle and shedding of the lining of the uterus? Do you have time in your work place to take a slow day? I certainly have not experienced that outside creating nurturing space for myself.

Emancipation comes with the menopause. With the release of the last egg, women are relieved of their biology and social expectations to reproduce. Cessation of the menses cycle is a type of liberation. Liberated from the constraints of procreation, liberated from mess, liberated from the smell. And in this society that shames women's blood, liberated from having to pretend that nothing is happening to your body. Within our culture the menstrual cycle is glossed over. It is fundamental to the perpetuation of the species yet the current marketing campaign for sanitary products are focussing on the fact that we females can just mop the blood up with their product and act like nothing is happening. I do not believe that emancipation lies in pretending that nothing is happening. At what point will we culturally acknowledge that a women's monthly cycle is the sacred bringer of life?

Women are sacred bringers of life.

***SUBMISSION BY
JENNIFER WESTON, 55, UK***