

CHAPTER 17

Menstruation

Why do humans, some monkeys, the elephant shrew and one type of bat menstruate? In 1993, Margie Profet, of the University of California, put forward a theory that menstruation is a defense against pathogens transported by sperm. There are several problems with this theory. Firstly, sperm are the least important factor in transmitting sexually transmitted diseases. Secondly, menstruation is quite ineffective in clearing an infection and, in fact, often makes it worse. Thirdly, in 'less developed' societies, women menstruate relatively rarely (the rest of the time, they are too young, pregnant, lactating or menopausal).

In modern society, we speak of 'normal' menstrual cycles but, in our ancient ancestors, menstrual cycles were probably very abnormal and indicative of reproductive inactivity due to social or psychological problems. Menstrual cycles are a product of our own domestication and, in these terms, many problems, both sexual as well as clinical/pathological, may be understood better. Women did not evolve to display perpetual cyclic appetites, nor does an ovary that proceeds through thirteen ovulatory cycles a year reflect a biological entity that is the human female.

What is usually lost sight of is that, while only a few mammals menstruate, they all undergo the same cyclic changes in the lining of the womb and they all slough off the outermost layers if fertilisation does not occur. The difference is that most mammals resorb this tissue without noticeable bleeding and the sloughed-off material is not passed to the outside. In those mammals that do menstruate, the changes in the lining of the womb in preparation for fertilisation tend to be more thoroughgoing, which may explain the difference. In any case, the basic reason for such a seemingly wasteful process is simply that it is far more energy-efficient than continually maintaining the lining of the womb in a state ready for implantation of the fertilised ovum.

The female body is a miraculous piece of natural engineering. Every month or so it goes through a complex cycle of changes designed to make it possible to pop out kiddies. A period is the most obvious sign of these internal, rhythmic changes. Each month or so between menarche - the start of menstruation - and menopause, a woman's body ripens one of the hundreds of eggs which have been inside her since she was born. The eggs are stored in the ovaries which lie in the abdomen on either side of the uterus. When the egg is fully matured, it is released from the ovary and makes its way down the fallopian tubes towards the uterus. If, during this journey, the egg bumps into some quality man-juice, the fertilised egg implants in the thick, bloody lining of the uterus called the endometrium and develops, over nine months, into 'Bubs'. If fertilisation doesn't happen, the egg and the endometrium break down and pass out of the body, through the vagina, during the next period.

The average age to start is thirteen. A century ago, it was fifteen, but the decline seems to have stopped in recent years. There is often a white or yellowish discharge from the vagina for about six months before the first period.

According to text books, a woman's period should come regularly every 28 days or so, and the blood lost is about the equivalent of a quarter of a cup. Trouble is, bodies can't read text books and many of them do something different. Some women get irregular periods, or periods that come regularly but with longer intervals in between. Others have a 'flood' of blood each month. A few women have a combination of problems, but unusual periods don't necessarily mean there's anything wrong. However, problem periods may point to an underlying medical problem. Many things can effect a woman's cycle, including weight loss, change in diet, excessive physical activity, stress, excitement, drugs such as anabolic steroids, hormones, spironolactone, cytotoxic agents and heroin.

Perhaps the only drawback to having a long cycle is that a woman can be four months pregnant before she realises it. Women don't menstruate during pregnancy but some bleed

slightly about seven days after conception, when the group of cells which eventually becomes the baby attaches itself to the wall of the womb. Some also have a small blood-tinged vaginal discharge in the first two or three months of pregnancy and this can be construed as a period. Any extended bleeding should prompt a visit to a doctor; it can signal such a medical emergency as an ectopic pregnancy or an impending miscarriage.

The market in products for dealing with the mess is extremely competitive. Tampons were surging ahead in the popularity stakes until toxic shock syndrome hit the headlines. Toxic shock is a severe, potentially fatal condition caused by a bacterium, *Staphylococcus aureus*, present in just about every woman's vagina. Its association with tampons was mainly due to manufacturers making too good a product. Their tampons were so absorbent they sopped up all the magnesium in the vagina. By sheer bad luck, this makes staphs produce lots of the toxin which causes the symptoms. When the brands were taken off the market, the number of cases per year in the US fell from 890 (with 35 deaths) to 61 (with no deaths).

To play it safe, tampons with the least absorbency are the best to use (preferably of natural fibre) and should be changed at least every six to eight hours (pads should be used at night). Sudden fever, vomiting and diarrhoea, fainting or near fainting, or a widespread rash that looks like a sunburn are symptoms of toxic shock syndrome, so the tampon should be removed at once and a doctor consulted immediately if any of these occur.

It's also a good idea to avoid tampons at the beginning and end of a period when the vagina is relatively dry and tampons can cause tiny lacerations which can allow entry of bacteria and viruses, or use a water-soluble lubricant like KY jelly to ease insertion.

New users often have difficulty inserting tampons through sheer ignorance of their anatomy. The vagina is angled towards the back, and a tampon must be inserted in this direction. If it keeps slipping out, it's not being placed deep enough in the vagina. Don't panic; it can't get lost in there.

It's not a good idea to get sucked into using deodorant napkins and tampons; soap and water is much more effective and much less likely to cause allergic reactions.

Menstrual sponges were in use in the early 70s but proved messy, hard to clean and a bacterial trap.

As if all the mess of menstruation weren't enough, 70-90 percent of menstruating women have premenstrual syndrome (PMS; also called premenstrual tension or PMT), with symptoms including the desire to ram one's shopping cart into another shopper, sobbing uncontrollably, swollen and tender tits, abdominal bloating, headache, fatigue, depression, suicidal tendencies, irritability, swelling, anxiety, acne, constipation, increased appetite, hives and asthma. Phew!

Then there is the dull aching or sharp wracking pain in the back that begins at, or slightly before, the onset of the period and carries on anywhere from a day or so to throughout the entire flow.

Some women get PMS quite mildly - a day or two of 'not feeling right' and it's over. Others get it quite badly. There is usually more than one victim in every case of PMS and, if a man knows that his woman is likely to feel grouchy and unhappy at certain times, it's a good idea for him to talk openly about it with her.

Hormone imbalances are usually blamed for all this but prostaglandins and low serotonin may also be important. Remedies based on these supposed causes do help. The Pill fosters more regular periods, lessens excessive flow, menstrual cramping and PMS. It is possible to use The Pill to skip periods altogether but this is not usually advised because of possible increased risk of cancer. Progesterone-containing IUDs also cause lighter periods and reduce menstrual and premenstrual cramping.

Most of the herbs reputed to ease menstrual discomforts have some oestrogenic action. These include anise, black cohosh, fennel, fenugreek and red clover.

Aspirin and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs counteract prostaglandins and help alleviate PMS and menstrual cramps.

The most effective agent found so far is Prozac, which raises serotonin levels and eliminates or reduces both physical and emotional symptoms of PMS in 80-90 percent of women with severe PMS. Magnesium has also been found to produce a striking decrease in depression, mood swings and bad feelings, which may be because lack of magnesium interferes with the action of serotonin. Buy it as a supplement or get it by eating nuts, seeds, whole grains and legumes, which will also keep blood glucose more or less constant and stop insulin surges contributing to anxiety and irritability.

Over half of low-activity women report a decrease in menstrual discomfort when they begin exercising regularly. This is probably due to improved tone and circulation.

Perhaps the best exercise to relieve menstrual cramps (both before and after the period starts) is sex - or, more specifically, orgasm. This helps relieve the vasocongestion and 'move things along'.

Many women get most interested in sex at the time of menstruation. This is attributed to the increased blood flow in the area but it's also possible that the low level of serotonin at this time is largely responsible.

Sex during menstruation can be messy. The neatest way to avoid this is to use a diaphragm. Failing that, use towels under you and have a washcloth handy. Or there's always anal sex or oral sex or masturbation (mutual or otherwise). Whatever you do, don't leave a tampon in during sex; it can get jammed up where you'll have a helluva job removing it.

Theoretically, there is a greater risk of transmitting sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV) during menstruation, but this is unproven. So is the possibility that sex during menstruation may contribute to endometriosis.

Why have virtually all cultures and all religions considered women to be untouchable or unclean when they were menstruating and prohibited intercourse during this time? Perhaps the best explanation is that it was a pretty spooky phenomenon (anyone else who bled that long was headed for the happy hunting ground) and needed to be wrapped up in magic and taboos. These days, we're more rational; have you checked your horoscope lately?