

# Myths and Challenges Regarding Menstrual Hygiene among Adolescent Girls of Islamabad



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## Abstract

**Background:** Menstrual hygiene remains clouded by misconceptions, posing challenges for adolescent girls. This study aims to identify myths surrounding menstrual hygiene among young girls in Islamabad and recognize the challenges they face in maintaining proper menstrual hygiene.

**Methods:** A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted in three government schools in Islamabad, involving adolescent girls aged 13-18 years in grades 8-12 over a six-month period. Simple random sampling was used to enroll 600 participants, and data were collected using a self-structured, pre-tested questionnaire. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS version 25.

**Results:** Of the 600 participants, 47% were in the age group of 13-15 years, and 53% were in the age group of 16-18 years. Mothers were the primary source of information for 85.8% of the girls. Common myths included 69% of girls avoiding baths based on advice from elders and 58.2% avoiding washing their groin during menstruation. Challenges reported by adolescent girls included 38.8% finding menstrual products unaffordable, 56.6% lacking sanitary pads at school, and 54.8% feeling embarrassed about asking for menstrual products. Additionally, 56.5% of girls were hesitant to discuss genital issues due to social taboos.

**Conclusion:** This study highlights prevalent myths and challenges undermining menstrual hygiene practices among adolescent girls. Debunking these myths and providing necessary facilities are essential to enhance menstrual health and overall quality of life for adolescent girls.

**Keywords:** Menstrual hygiene, adolescent girls, myths, challenges.

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## Introduction

Menstruation is a natural phenomenon, defined as “the periodic discharge of blood from the uterus through the vagina, occurring more or less at regular monthly intervals throughout the active reproductive life of a female” (1). The UN defines adolescence as the period between 10 and 19 years of age (2). About 1/5th of the total female population in the world is of adolescent girls (3). Thus, it is a distinctive stage of human development and an important time for laying the basis of good health. Menstrual health is basic for improving global population health and achieving Sustainable Development Goals (4). This can be achieved by promoting hygienic practices among adolescent girls.

The topic of menstruation has been clouded by various myths. Although menstruation is a normal physiological process, several misconceptions have been associated with it. The most common of which is the association of

menstruation with impurity and avoidance to take a bath. Till today, in many backward areas of India, menstruating women and girls are considered impure and kept isolated from the society during their menstrual period (5). These myths and misconceptions prevent proper menstrual hygiene practices. Research at Tangerang in 2020 in a senior girl's high school, revealed that the population who believed in the myths was 3.7 times more likely to practice poor hygiene during their periods (6). Furthermore, lack of knowledge, unavailability and unaffordability of sanitary products are certain challenges faced by adolescent girls. A study conducted in Mardan, Pakistan recognized this issue for the first time that 57% of Pakistani women due to lack of knowledge and money could not practice hygienic methods during menstruation and that 67% of students had incomplete knowledge regarding menstrual hygiene (3). These findings are further supported by various studies reported from South Asia where girls had poor knowledge of

menstruation and thus did not fully understand the physical process of menstruation (7). According to WHO and UNICEF, Menstrual hygiene management (MHM) is defined as “women and adolescent girls having access to menstrual hygiene products, soap and water, and adequate sanitation facilities throughout the menstrual cycle”. It also includes women understanding the basic facts related to the menstrual cycle and how to manage it with confidence and dignity (8). However, the low and middle-income countries lack such basic facilities. In Pakistan, poor MHM stems from the fact that significant knowledge gaps exist among adolescent girls. Access to clean and safe menstrual products is an important factor in menstrual hygiene but masses in Pakistan utilize old and reusable cloth pieces. Young girls tend to overuse these products due to unavailability, resulting in various health concerns, such as reproductive tract and urinary tract infections (9). Stigmas associated with menstruation further make it difficult for adolescent girls to seek treatment for these health issues. These infections are often left untreated because young girls are hesitant to discuss this 'taboo topic' with their mothers and healthcare officials. Thus, they incline toward unreliable sources of information and unhygienic practices. Furthermore, inadequate access to WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) facilities, particularly in schools and other public places, is a major obstacle (10). These issues result in school absenteeism, poor academic performance, less participation in sports or other physical activities and low self-esteem in adolescent girls (11). Appropriate menstrual hygiene practices hold significant importance because inability to achieve these increases vulnerability of adolescent girls to psychological, physiological, and certain medical issues.

Menstrual hygiene plays a significant role in improving the life and health quality concerns of females (1). Improvement of menstrual hygiene practices can be done by identifying the current issues. Some studies have been conducted in Pakistan, but more work needs to be done. Thus, the objective of this study is to highlight the challenges that the adolescent girls of Islamabad face and the prevalent myths that undermine their practice of menstrual hygiene. The purpose of this study is to raise awareness and enable adolescent girls to understand and manage their monthly menstrual cycle in a healthy and dignified way.

## Methodology

This descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted over a period of six months (March 2022 to August 2022) by visiting three government schools of Islamabad. The study included adolescent girls of age group 13-18 years studying in grades 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12. Girls who had not attained menarche in above mentioned classes were not included in the study. Ethical approval was taken from Ethical Review

Board FMTI, PIMS, Islamabad. Informed consent was taken from all the participants and the confidentiality of the participants was ensured. The sample size of 600 was calculated using the Epi info app. A self-structured, pre-tested questionnaire was administered to gather the data by using simple random sampling. The questionnaire comprised three sections. The first section included the Socio-demographic profile of the participants (7 items). The second section encompassed myths (6 items) and the third section sought the challenges regarding menstrual hygiene faced by adolescent girls (15 items).

**Statistical Analysis:** The data was analyzed using SPSS version 25. A Chi-square test was applied to find an association between factors related to menstrual hygiene. P-value of  $<0.05$  was considered statistically significant.

## Results

A total of 600 adolescent girls participated in this study. The mean age of participants was 15 +/- 0.5 years (about 6 months). Regarding the source of information regarding menstruation, 85.8% of girls reported their mothers as the sole source of information, while the remaining 14.2% received information from other sources which include teachers, friends, relatives, and media.

Myths regarding menstrual hygiene were quite common in the study population. 69% of the girls avoided bathing during menstruation. According to 50.8%, 13.3%, and 6.5% of the adolescent girls, the reasons for not having a bath were that elders urged them not to, bathing caused cramps, and bathing produced abnormal blood flow, respectively. While 29.3% did not avoid taking baths. Regarding the use of absorbent material, our study indicated 67.7% of girls used pads and 31.3% used cloth, out of which only 6.2% used new fabric and 25.1% used old fabric.

The challenges faced by adolescent girls in achieving menstrual hygiene were reported as follows: 54.8% of the girls felt embarrassed in buying/asking for menstrual products and 25.7% said they felt embarrassed sometimes. 86.5% reported not getting sanitary pads for free at schools. School absenteeism during menstruation was reported by 9.3% of the girls whereas 90.8% attended school. 31.2% of girls changed menstrual products once per day and 56.7% changed 2-3 times per day. 9.3% of the girls reported using menstrual products for a longer period than recommended. The results of our study point out that 69% of adolescent girls experienced the symptoms of reproductive tract infections and the majority; 67.5% were not receiving any treatment for these symptoms. In addition, 56.5% were hesitant in discussing these health issues with their family, friends, or health professionals. The most common source of information for girls was mothers which had a significant association with the myth of not taking bath ( $p=0.04$ ). Those who avoided bathing during menstruation experienced symptoms of Reproductive tract infections

( $p=0.01$ ). Girls who used menstrual products for a longer duration for not having any replacement also experienced Reproductive tract infections ( $p=0.04$ ). An association was also found between those who were unaware of different menstrual products and using cloth (old or new) as absorbent material ( $p=0.01$ ).

**Table 1. Sociodemographic variable**

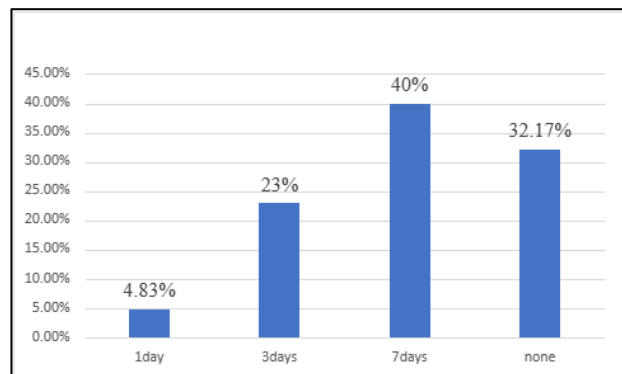
Variables	Percentages	
Age (In Years)	13-15	47%
	16-18	53%
Education Level	8th Grade	3.7%
	9th Grade	30.17%
	10th Grade	38.8%
	11th Grade	3.3%
	12th Grade	24%
Family Income	Below 40,000	31.67%
	40,000-100,000	49.3%
	Above 100,000	19.0%
Mother's Education	Uneducated	17.3%
	Primary (1-5)	13.3%
	Secondary (6-10)	28.5%
	Intermediate Level	20.8%
	Graduate or Postgraduate	20.0%

**Table 2. Myths related to menstrual hygiene**

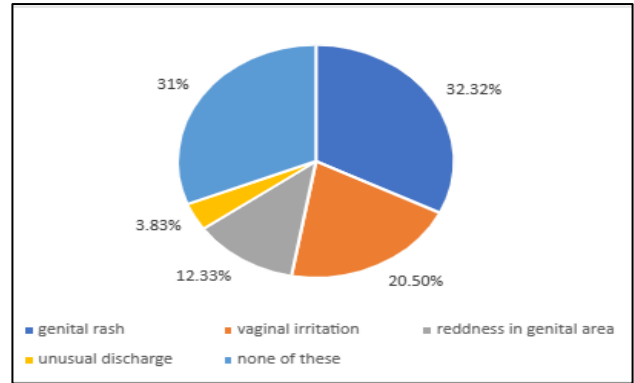
Myths	Yes	No
Do you usually feel impure when you menstruate?	79.8%	20.2%
Do you avoid taking baths during menstruation?	69%	31%
Do you wash the groin during menstruation?	41.8%	58%
Do you take medicine during menstruation?	63%	37%

**Table 3. Challenges related to menstrual hygiene**

Challenges	Yes	No
Do you find menstrual products expensive?	38.8%	61.1%
Are you aware of different menstrual products?	58%	42%
Are menstrual products available at your school?	43.3%	56.7%
Does your school ensure proper disposal of menstrual products?	58%	42%
Hesitation to talk about RTI symptoms with family/friends/health professionals:	43%	57%



**Figure 1. Days for skipping bath during menstruation**



**Figure 2. Symptoms experienced during menstruation**

### Discussion

Our research concluded that 85.8% of study participants had their mothers as the sole source of information regarding menstruation, which is as per research in Afghanistan, where 56.6% of girls (8), and in Saudi Arabia, where 66.8% of girls reported the same (9). This shows that mothers play a major role in promoting misconceptions and myths in adolescent girls as confirmed by a study in Islamabad in 2018 (10). Majority (69%) of the girls in our study avoided baths during menstruation, which is in accordance with a study conducted in Nepal (11) and Lahore (1). The main reason behind this was the advice of elders, as reported by 50.8 percent of the girls' avoiding baths. About 41.8% of the girls in our study reported avoiding washing the groin. This finding is supported by research conducted in Ethiopia where 30.5% percent of the study population didn't clean their external genitalia during the course of menstruation (12). The same myth was also found in a study population of Afghanistan where two-fifth of the participant did not wash themselves during menstruation (8). A peculiar finding of our research was that 79.8% of the adolescent girls in our study said that they felt impure while menstruating. This notion is also quite common in far-western Nepal where many menstruating women were segregated in a little shed, considering them impure (11). About 37% of the adolescent girls in our study reported that they avoided taking medicines during menstruation. A study in Saudi Arabia stated about 66.6% believed that painkillers are harmful to use during menstruation (9).

According to our results, most girls used pads (67.67%), which is in line with the study conducted in India (5) but in contrast to a study conducted in Zambia, where the use of cloth was more common (14). Nearly one-third of girls (32.33%) in our study also used clothes or other products, which is in line with a study done in Ethiopia (12). About 38.8% of girls found menstrual products expensive in Islamabad as compared to 57% in Mardan (3).

In the current research, about 43.3% of schools provided sanitary products, whereas a study in Layyah reported availability to be 60% to 77% (15). About 58% of girls reported not having a proper method of disposing of menstrual products in schools which is also a problem in Bangladesh (16). This highlights the challenge of the lack of basic amenities in schools, further causing problems and embarrassment in an emergency. (15). Researchers in Bangladesh and Zambia reported school abstinence to be a

big issue during menstruation but in our study, only a minor percentage of girls (9.33%) reported abstinence during periods. This indicates school abstinence is not a major issue in our study (12) (14). Research in India reported that over half of the girls maintain hygiene by changing menstrual pads about 2 to 3 times daily and didn't use a single product longer than advised, which correlates with our study results (13). Our findings are also corroborated by an Ethiopian study (17). 31% of the adolescent girls in our study reported that they had no symptoms during menstruation, in accordance with research in India, where 37.6% of girls reported the same (7). According to our research, 54.8% of the girls were embarrassed about asking for menstrual products, in contrast to a study conducted in Bhutan where only 5.1% of the participants were uncomfortable talking about menstrual health management (18). Furthermore, 67.5% of the girls didn't receive any treatment for reproductive tract infection (RTI) symptoms which was as per the study conducted in Ireland, where 95.1% of the girls preferred non-pharmacological management strategies (19). Adolescent girls face this hesitation due to the sociocultural taboos associated with the topic menstruation and its relevant issues.

## Conclusion

The study concluded that different challenges along with myths and sociocultural taboos pose adverse health effects on the menstrual hygiene of adolescent girls. This situation calls for active participation from educational communities to initiate awareness campaigns regarding menstruation management.

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