


A dad's guide to periods.



HEY DADS!

Welcome to a dad's guide to periods, your toolkit for understanding periods and how to help your kids as they enter a new phase of their growth!

We know the topic of periods can feel a bit awkward or taboo, especially if you don't experience them. But it doesn't have to be that way! Our goal with this guidebook is to teach you things you may not have known about periods, discuss how you can talk to your kids about them and build your confidence in supporting your kids through their unique menstruation journey.

By increasing your knowledge on periods and period care, YOU can be a part of the movement to destigmatise this normal bodily process and help to create a supportive environment for all girls and those who menstruate!

These are some of the benefits Aussie dads expect to see from learning more about periods:

"Being an advocate for my child's health."

Fred

"Being able to offer appropriate information for my child, normalising the experience and being able to offer increased support for my daughter"

Justin

"Better communication with my kids and more confidence discussing the topic"

Anonymous

"A greater holistic understanding across the board and more normalisation around the natural process"

Trent

We had 20 fathers from around Australia participate in a survey that questioned them on what they already knew or didn't know about periods and what they wanted more support with.

Their answers have helped us formulate this guidebook and you can read some of their responses throughout!

Period basics

The term **period** refers to the event where the lining of the uterus is shed. Another term for periods is **menstruation**. Periods mark the start of a **menstrual cycle**, which is a full process of hormonal fluctuations that occur over the course of a few weeks.

Periods can start anywhere between 8-16 years of age. The first period is called **menarche**. It's not uncommon for the first (even the second and third) period to be short in duration (3-4 days) and the flow to be quite light. It can actually take around 12-18 months for periods to come on a regular cycle, but some people will have regular periods from the start.

Once regulated, periods will come approximately every month, however the normal length of a menstrual cycle can range from 21-35 days. The normal length for the period itself is anywhere from 3-7 days.

Signs your child might be about to start their period

On average, most females will start their period around 12-13 years old, however they could start from as young as 8 years old. It can be hard to rely on age alone due to this, so there are some signs you can look out for that could mean your child is approaching menarche. If you notice these changes it could be a good time to have a chat about periods (we've got tips on those conversations later on!)

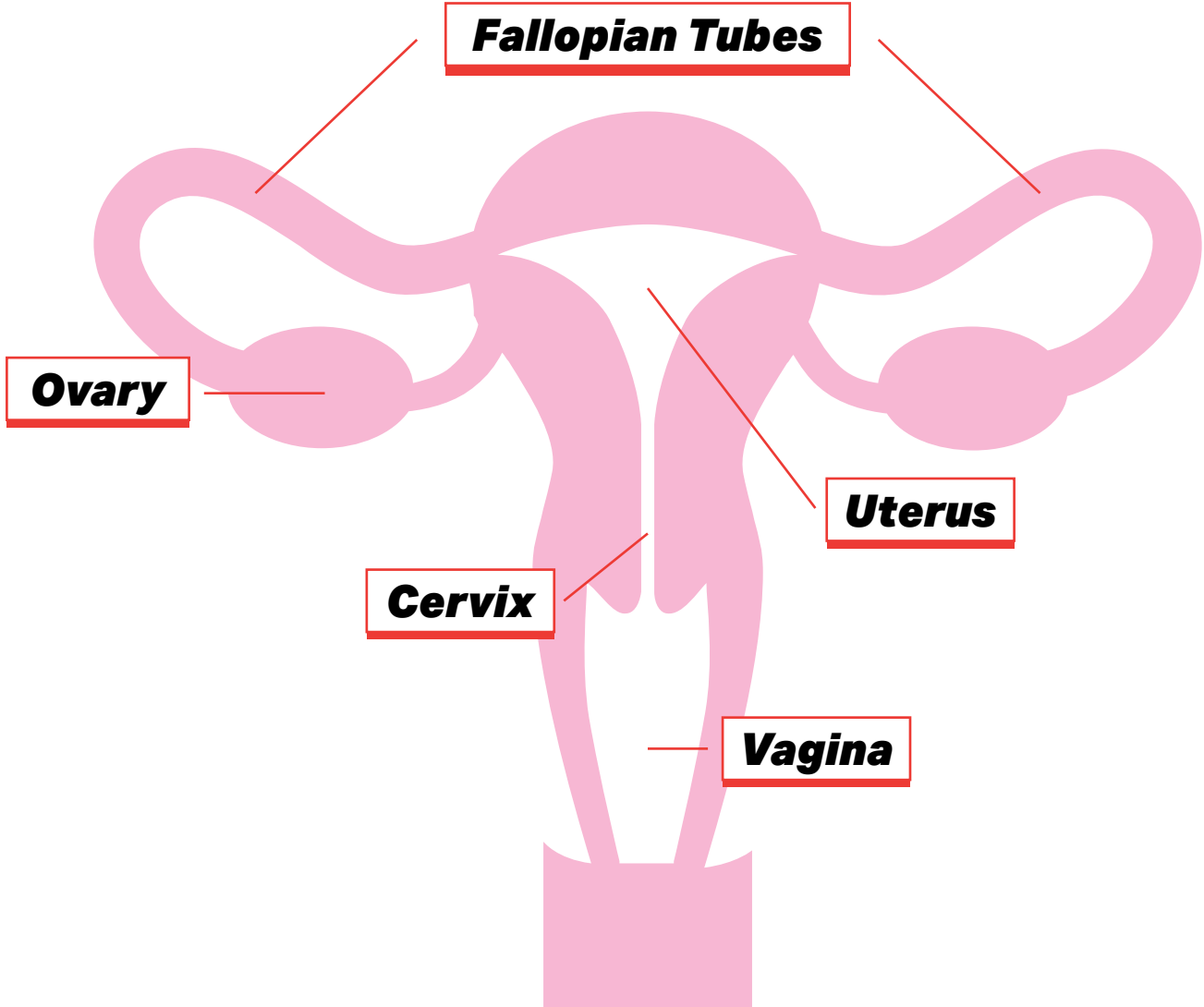
- Growth spurt – they may seem like they've grown a foot over night!
- You may notice they start getting some pimples or acne.
- Their body shape may start to change, such as hips getting wider.
- Their breasts may start to grow.
- You might notice some underarm hair starting to grow.
- They may become more sensitive or experience more mood swings than before.

Hidden Signs

There are changes that could happen that you won't know about unless your child tells you:

- Pubic hair may start growing.
- They may start noticing some discharge on their underwear. This is a normal substance that is produced within the vagina and cervix because of the hormonal fluctuations of the menstrual cycle.

Womens
reproductive
system



The Menstrual Cycle

While periods are one of the most obvious signs of hormonal transition in puberty, there are a number of hormonal changes that go on throughout the cycle. The key hormones involved are oestrogen, progesterone, follicle stimulating hormone (FSH) and luteinising hormone (LH). Fluctuations in these hormones occur in 4 different phases:

55% of the Aussie dads we surveyed didn't know about any hormones related to the menstrual cycle.

Menstruation Phase

Duration: 3-7 days

Each menstrual cycle starts with a period. This is when the lining of the uterus is shed and the bleed occurs. The reproductive hormones are at their lowest during menstruation.

During this time your child may feel more introverted and may have some uncomfortable symptoms pop up (*more on that soon!*)

Follicular Phase

Duration: 10-16 days

The follicular phase is inclusive of the period and starts on day 1 of the bleed. Initially hormone levels are low during the period, but then FSH increases to stimulate an egg to mature in the ovary. This process encourages oestrogen to be produced which will steadily increase over this phase, preparing the body for ovulation.

During this time your child may feel motivated, extroverted and productive.

Ovulation Phase

Duration: 16-32 hours

In this phase a surge in LH and oestrogen occurs that stimulates the release of an egg from one ovary into the fallopian tube where it will travel to the uterus – this is called ovulation. Only one egg is released from one ovary each cycle.

During this time your child may feel energetic, social and confident. Some physical symptoms such as pelvic discomfort, sore or swollen breasts and breakouts can happen at this time for some people.

Luteal Phase

Duration: 9-16 days

After ovulation the body is focusing on preparing the uterus to support the egg that was released if it becomes fertilised, which involves an increase in oestrogen and progesterone that act to thicken the lining of the uterus. If fertilisation (conception) doesn't occur then the levels of these hormones will drop which will trigger the lining of the uterus to shed (the next period) – and the cycle begins again!

During this time your child may feel more sensitive and lower in energy. This is a common time for the classic 'PMS' symptoms you may have heard about before. PMS stands for pre-menstrual syndrome and refers to a collection of symptoms that can happen before a period starts such as fatigue, break outs, low mood, anxiousness, abdominal pain and bloating.

Common symptoms

PMS and period symptoms occur due to the fluctuations in hormones throughout the menstrual cycle. It's natural during the pre-menstrual time for your child to feel a little low in energy and a little more sensitive than usual. It's also normal for them to feel some mild fatigue, mild pelvic discomfort and a bit sensitive during their period. If their symptoms are any more severe than this, it can be a sign that

their hormone levels aren't quite correct. It's important your child's body has time to mature its hormonal pathways, so it's often best to utilise foods and nutrients to help address these more intense symptoms before trialling any hormone-influencing medication. Here we have the most common PMS and period symptoms and what you can give your child to help!

Common pre-menstrual and period symptoms *(and how to relieve them!)*

Mood Swings

Minimum 8 hours sleep a night
Healthy fats: nuts, seeds, avocado, fish
Leafy Greens: kale, spinach, broccoli
Magnesium, B-complex vitamins*

Bloating

Herbal teas: peppermint, chamomile, ginger
1.5-2L water daily
Fibre: oats, quinoa, legumes, pear, carrot, beetroot, chia seeds

Acne

Healthy fats: nuts, seeds, avocado, fish
1.5-2L water daily
Cut down sweets, junk food and refined foods like pastries
Zinc, vitamin C *

Pain

Heat packs
Healthy fats: nuts, seeds, avocado, fish
Leafy greens: kale, spinach, broccoli
Ginger & turmeric tea
Magnesium, B6, zinc, omega-3 fatty acids *

Fatigue

Minimum 8 hours sleep a night
Moderate-intensity exercise outdoors
1.5-2L water daily
B-complex vitamins *

**Consult with a health practitioner before starting new supplements.*

How to talk about periods

It can feel awkward talking to your child about periods, especially if you don't experience them yourself. But it doesn't have to be! The more you can normalise it for your child, the less awkward the topic will become. This helps create a safe and supportive environment for them to ask questions or seek help if they need it. It also helps reduce feelings of embarrassment or shame your child may have around what is a totally natural process!

- Use those random opportunities where the topic of periods come up, like when it's mentioned on TV or when you walk past the pads and tampons at the supermarket, to initiate a conversation.
- Avoid using phrases like 'aunt flow' or 'the crimson wave' – it may feel easier to bring humour into it, but this can perpetuate the taboo instead of normalising. Just say periods or menstruation. The more anatomically correct you can be the less weird the topic feels.
- Remind your child that periods are normal. You can reflect to them that you understand it's a big change for them, but that you've got their back and are there to support them.

What to say to your sons about periods

Firstly, it is important that you also talk to your sons about periods to help create a supportive environment for your child who is menstruating. Half the population menstruate, so helping your son understand the topic means that they can also help reduce the stigma surrounding periods as they mature.

- Encourage them to ask questions if they're unsure about something
- Let them know periods are normal and they're not gross or disgusting.
- Talk to them about being kind and not teasing their sibling
- Tell them that their sibling might like to have some space and that's ok

What to say to your non-binary child

If your child doesn't identify as female it can feel really confronting when their period starts. There are a few things you can tell them to provide some reassurance:

- Let them know they can still just be themselves, having a period doesn't define who they are
- They're not alone – there are lots of people that have gone through the same thing
- You're in their corner - you can help them find advice and learn more

How to answer some **common questions**

How do I know **when it's going to come?**

It can take some time to figure out what your cues are, but you may notice you feel more sensitive, you may get some pimples or notice some bloating. It could help for you to start writing down some symptoms you've noticed the next time your period comes.

Will it **hurt?**

It can hurt for some people and it's normal to feel a bit of discomfort. But if it really hurts let me know, because I have some strategies that can help.

Can I **swim?**

Yes, however you'll need to use a tampon or menstrual cup because pads will fill up with water which can be uncomfortable.

Do you think **people will know I have my period?**

No, not unless you decide to tell them.

Do I need to **shower/bath more?**

Once a day is fine, but you might like to shower in the morning and the evening. Either is fine, but it is important that you maintain your hygiene for your own comfort.

What should I do with the pads or tampons **once I'm done with them?**

Just wrap them up in some toilet paper and pop them in the bin. It's important you don't flush anything down the toilet.

When to seek help from a doctor

60% of the Aussie dads we surveyed weren't completely certain of when they should take their child to the doctor for a period-related concern.

Your child will likely handle their period in private for the most part and may not always be upfront if something is wrong. You can check in with them by asking how they're going and let them know if they need anything you're there to help. If your child mentions severe pain, irregular or heavy bleeding, or very intense emotions, you should consider taking them to a doctor.

They're having *severe pain* every period

Mild cramps are normal, but if your child is doubling over and crying from pain every period then something is wrong.

Their periods are *extremely heavy*

If your child is having to change their pad, tampon, cup etc. every 1-2 hours for several hours in a row take them to have that investigated.

They're experiencing *very intense emotions* such as depression, anxiety or mania before or during their period

This can be a sign of severe hormonal imbalances that can be impacting chemical messengers in the brain that influence emotion. This needs to be looked into.

Their periods are *very irregular*

Irregularity is to be expected for the first 12-18 months after menarche, however if your child's period hasn't regulated after 2 years post-menarche it's important to have that investigated.

Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS)

TSS is a serious and potentially fatal condition caused by bacterial infection of certain strains of bacteria. These strains can release toxins into the bloodstream that affect the function of vital organs. There is a risk of developing TSS if tampons are left in for too long (>8 hours). Changes to tampon manufacturing has significantly reduced this risk, but avoidance guidelines remain the same. Symptoms include fever, chills, headache, vomiting, low blood pressure, rashes.

Purchasing **period products**

If you've ever been past the period product section in the aisles of your local supermarket you will have seen the very large selection of options - it can feel pretty overwhelming! Here's the low-down on the different options there are for your child.

Pads

Pads are a popular choice for kids that are just starting their periods because they're simple to use and non-invasive. They come in different absorbency levels to accommodate the heaviness of blood flow. It can take a couple of periods before your child will be able to identify how heavy their flow is, but typically the first few periods will have a light or regular flow. Pads also come with or without 'wings' which are flaps attached to the long edges of the pad that wrap around the underwear to hold the pad in place and prevent leakage. You can ask your child which absorbency level they need and their preference on wings or no wings, or you can buy a few options for them to try.

Pads should be changed when they're roughly 50-70% full or approximately every 4 hours for hygiene. There are overnight pads that are longer and thicker and can be worn all night in bed.

Period Underwear

Period underwear is becoming more popular as they look and feel like normal underwear but have an absorbent lining in the gusset. Your child might like to use these the first few times they have their period but may find they need to swap to pads or tampons for the heaviest days or if they start to develop a heavy flow. Period underwear are machine washable and reusable, making them an environmental friendly option too.

Tampons

Tampons are a discreet option that can't be seen when in use and are more comfortable than pads while playing sport or swimming. However, your child may not feel comfortable using them initially as they have to be inserted into the vagina which can feel confronting to do. Applicator tampons are often easier to use when starting out as they don't require the user to use their fingers to insert the tampon and instead the applicator device pushes the tampon in. Tampons also come in different absorbency levels.

Tampons need to be changed when full or every 4-6 hours for hygiene. Tampons should not be left in for more than 8 hours due to the risk of Toxic Shock Syndrome

Menstrual Cup

A menstrual cup looks a little like an egg cup and is inserted into the vagina where it collects blood that is shed. It can be worn for 8-12 hours, which makes it a convenient option for your child if they don't enjoy dealing with sanitary products at school. However, using menstrual cups can feel a bit confronting to use initially and can be tricky to get used to. They generally come in 2 sizes, the smaller size being more appropriate for teens.

The cup needs to be washed with warm water between uses and then sanitised in boiling water after each period. They typically require replacing completely every 2 years.

NICE WORK!

You've taken the time to understand and support your child as they navigate the changes in their body. Your knowledge and empathy make all the difference!

More Resources

You can find more information about periods and period care in the Period Education Hub on our website: <https://www.sharethedignity.org.au/end-period-poverty/educationhub>

References

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