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The first period

Parents need to address the personal concerns of girls who are on the brink of adulthood, such as their reactions to the bodily changes, says DATO DR NOR ASHIKIN MOKHTAR

Most women do not remember much about their first period, but whatever fragments of memory remain would probably include feelings of discomfort, a tinge of embarrassment and a great deal of confusion.

Things haven't changed much over the generations. Girls today still experience the same emotions when they face puberty and their first menstrual period, although they may be exposed to more information on sex and reproduction through the media and pop culture.

The first period marks a girl's transition into womanhood. It is important for her to understand what menstruation means and what the implications are on her life — it is not just about buying sanitary pads but about being sexually responsible.

With children and teenagers becoming increasingly aware of their bodies, parents actually face a greater challenge in talking to them about puberty. Parents should not assume that their children will be better prepared for puberty just because the information is readily accessible through the TV, Internet or their friends.

Coming of age

Throughout history, the age of the first period — medically referred to as "menarche" — has become lower, as girls increasingly develop at a younger age.

Many factors in our culture and environment play a role in determining this. It is believed that improved nutrition, better environmental circumstances and smaller families have brought the age of menarche lower. Cultural and genetic factors also come into play as girls from different races seem to develop at a different rate.

You can expect your daughter to get her first period when she is about 12 or 13 years old, roughly two-and-a-half years after her breasts start developing, and four to six months after her pubic and underarm hair begin growing.

However, this varies between individuals and there are girls who start menstruating as early as the age of nine, and others as late as 15 or 16. If your daughter starts menstruating too early or if she has not had a period past the age of 16, consult a doctor to find out what are the factors causing this.

If a girl has started having periods but they are more than three months apart, she should be taken to a doctor for the appropriate evaluation.

Conversely, if during her menstrual flow, she has excessive bleeding and has to change pads more than every one to two hours and her menses last for more than seven days, she should also be checked by her doctor.

Girls should be taught to mark their menses on a calendar so that problems can be more easily identified.

Womanhood beckons

What does menstruation mean for your daughter? It is a sign that her body is preparing to take on the responsibility of having a child, when the time is right.

Menstruation is part of the reproductive cycle that the body goes through every month (the cycle varies, ranging from 21 to 40 days for different women).

Once a month, your daughter's ovaries will release a tiny egg. If this egg is fertilised by sperm, it will attach to the wall of her uterus and develop into a baby in 9 months' time. Her body will naturally prepare for this: it will produce hormones that "tell" her



But if no sperm enters her body, the egg will not be fertilised. The egg will not attach to the wall of the uterus, so the uterus will discard the extra blood and tissue from its walls. This blood, tissue and unfertilised egg come out of the vagina as her monthly period.

As a parent, it is your responsibility to talk to your daughter about the changes that she is going through, even if she finds it as embarrassing as you do.

The “birds and the bees” talk should actually take place before your daughter gets her first period, preferably when the first signs of puberty — namely breast development — start to show.

Talking to your daughter about her period too early may be irrelevant for her, while approaching the subject too late will have passed the point of reassurance.

Unfortunately, this article isn't able to reveal any secrets about how to approach the subject or what to say to your daughter. It will be different for every parent, as it depends on your daughter's personality, your relationship with her and how much information has been exposed to.

But I do want to share some insight on the thoughts and emotions that girls experience regarding this stage of their life, as it will help parents to understand and approach the discussion from a broader perspective.

Studies of girls' responses to menarche have shown that it is a very important event in their lives that is experienced with intense emotions. Most girls have admitted that getting their first period can be stressful — however, if they are better prepared for this event, it can be more positive for them.

Research has found that most girls greet their first period with mixed feelings, including some degree of negativity. This could be because they were not sufficiently prepared to face it, for instance they might not have been given any information on the "raw", nuisance aspects of menstruation so they did not know what to expect.

Showing girls a science textbook is not enough to prepare them emotionally and psychologically. Parents need to address the personal concerns of girls who are on the brink of adulthood, such as their reactions to the bodily changes. It is easy to fixate on the biological and hygienic aspects of menstruation, and miss out on the social meaning, that is, their increasing maturity and responsibility.

Researchers have also hypothesised that girls may be confused by the mixed signals that they receive — on the one hand, we say that menstruation is a natural bodily occurrence and nothing to make a fuss about, but on the other hand, it is considered taboo to talk openly about having your period or carry around pads or tampons in an obvious manner.

If girls have to discover these revelations on their own, without any guidance or advice from parents, they are bound to feel some shame and perhaps even disgust towards their own bodies.

Teenagers today will get an abundance of information from their environment, but your role as a trusted confidante, who can impart wisdom based on your own experience, is irreplaceable. [a](#)





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