

Menses : Self-Care & Power

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Menstruation or Menses is an universal female experience. An experience, which, until a few years ago, was kept hushed and private in our Western culture. It is still, today, an experience that is not spoken of openly in mixed circles. Why has such a natural, common experience been kept secret and hidden in our culture, as well as many other cultures throughout the ages? Very few cultures have viewed menses as natural and beautiful, or as a sacred time. Yet, that is exactly what menses is - a sacred process, that women can learn to appreciate.

Since Biblical times, women have been branded as "unclean" during their menses cycle. Separate quarters were assigned for women to retire to, while flowing - and public arenas were off-limits during this time. This image of "uncleanness" has persisted across many ages, causing women shame and confusion, and bringing disgust to those who by chance became aware that a woman was experiencing menses.

The slang and jargon used, even today, to describe this natural cycle, speaks loudly of the historic and modern images issued by the thought of menstruation. "*On the rag*", "*The Curse*", "*THAT time of the month*," and so on, characterize menses as an inconvenience, an ordeal, and a shameful event. Historical literature contains many descriptions of problems that menstrual women could supposedly cause. At one time, people believed that a farmer's crops would not grow if a flowing woman walked through his fields; or that the dough would not rise, if she tried to bake bread during menses. Women were thought of as unclean and dangerous to their husbands, and were often made to sleep separately from him during her menses period. She had to cease flowing, then cleanse and purify herself before she could once again rejoin him in his bed



What Is Menses?

Menarche can begin at any time between the ages of 10 to 17. Initially, the cycles are irregular, unpredictable, painless, and anovulatory in the majority of young girls. After a year or two, the ovary produces enough cyclic estrogen to make a mature and fertile ova.

Every woman's cycle is unique, and usually becomes regularized. In some woman, periods occur every 23 days, in others, the cycle may occur every 32 days. The average length of a cycle from the beginning day of one cycle to the beginning day of the next cycle, is 28 days. Menstruation is periodic uterine bleeding that begins about 14 days after ovulation. The cycle usually lasts for about 5 days, with an average loss of 50 ml. of blood.

The cycles continue throughout the entire child-bearing period, which ends, on average, in the woman's fifth decade of life. Menstrual cycles slowly taper off, until they cease altogether, with the onset of menopause.

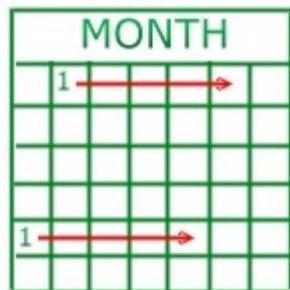
Again, menses is a natural common experience, and NOT a disease! For too long, people have viewed menses as an undesirable condition, one that makes a woman "sick" and "dirty."

Keep A Menses Calendar

Keeping a running record of your menses is a good idea for a few reasons. For one, you won't be surprised when your period arrives, preventing unexpected "accidents". Two, it helps you to

recognize your regular cycles. Do you flow about every 28 days? Or is your flow unique? This information helps you to a) prevent pregnancy b) engage in family planning and c) keep tabs on your general health. Your menstrual cycle is a good indication of your health in general. If they are regular and fairly pain free, then your health is likely to be pretty stable.

Find a small calendar that you can use for this sole purpose. One that has all of the months of a year on one or two pages is very useful - you can assess your cycles as a tight unit when you can see more than one month at a time. Record the first day of each period with subsequent "Xs" for each day of flow. The classic period occurs every 28 days. Thus the first day of a period is marked, followed by the first day of the next month's period. Count the days in between Day One of both cycles to deduce the length of your cycle. Do this for a few months before you accept it as your "norm". Assess the average for six months or even a year. The image to the right illustrates how to record the cycle for two months.



Common Sensations of Menses

Some women experience:

Dysmenorrhea, or painful uterine cramping, during the menses period. This discomfort is often relieved with heat, analgesics, rest and relaxation, and mild, enjoyable exercise.

Often women will notice a swelling in their breasts up to a week before menses begins. Some may experience headaches, acne breakouts, and slight weight gain, due to water retention.

Others may experience what is called **Premenstrual Syndrome** (PMS), characterized by irritability, depression, passivity, and fatigue.

Comfort Measures

- During your menses, try to relax and let yourself take it easy. If you must work, take frequent little rest periods, and feel the energy of your body.
- Drink plenty of fluids, especially herbal teas, juice, and fresh water.
- Wear comfortable, loose-fitting clothes, and cotton underwear.
- Get some fresh air, and breath deeply.
- If you experience painful menses, try some analgesics, and a hot pack at the small of your back. If you can, get someone to rub your feet, especially around your ankles and heels (pressure points for your ovaries and uterus).
- Eat plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Keep a journal and write down the insights you receive at this time. Native Americans believed that women were in a time of power during menses. Take advantage of this spiritual spurt of energy to gain insights and self-knowledge.
- Practice good menstrual hygiene. Change your absorbent tampon, pad, or cup regularly to avoid toxic shock syndrome, and prevent bacterial growth.
- Take a daily warm or hot bath - add bath salts, or aromatherapy oils, light a candle, lie back, and dream away. Don't fall asleep though!



- Dialogue with other women about your menses experiences - make it a natural, and normal part of your life!