

# Understanding Menstruation in a Scouting Context



**Outdoor Service Guides**

Scouting for Everybody!

As a fully inclusive program of all genders, scout leaders need to be knowledgeable about menstruation and provide appropriate support for scouts who experience that. The typical age for a first period is 12, with most starting to have cycles between age 10 and 15. However, some get them earlier and later, so age alone does not tell you if a person has a cycle.

## Cultural Issues

As a fully inclusive program, you may have scouts in your group who come from homes that are far more conservative or far more liberal than your own home. Girls have historically been shamed and discriminated against because of having periods. Periods are often a source of embarrassment and distress. Your job as a scout leader is to both normalize periods for your group and to respect your scouts' boundaries.

Not all people who have periods are women or girls. Scouts who are non-binary or trans can have periods too. When talking about periods with your group, try to use non-gendered language. Because periods are not something to be ashamed of, it is ideal to just let everyone in your group know about access to period supplies your group has, no matter what their gender or their personal need for such supplies. It is not unusual for a scout to discover on a trip to the bathroom that they need a pad or tampon and need to ask their buddy to go get them one.

Some parents may not allow their daughters to attend swimming, camping, or other events during their periods. Due to a variety of reasons, including cultural, financial, and anatomical, you may have scouts who just do not use some menstrual products. Tampons, cups, and soft disks, which must fit internally, are just not a solution for all girls. While those products may sound like they would make a scouting activity easier to attend, it is extremely important to not make value judgments about what products a girl uses. Reusable options like period panties and cloth pads can be expensive, and not all families are comfortable with washing them.

There are several "backcountry menstruation guides" available on the internet. Please be aware that those are generally targeted at adult women who can purchase and test any products without explaining their needs or choices to a parent. Many of these guides suggest using products that are appropriate for adults and emphasize earth-conscious choices over practicality. Some guides are full of myths and false facts. For this reason, it is important to realize that the needs of youth and teens with periods may not be met by the resources you can find.

## Practical Application

Especially in younger people and teens, periods can be random. While the ideal adult cycle puts periods on a regular schedule, many people don't experience that until adulthood. During those teen years, periods can show up anywhere from two weeks to eight weeks apart, instead of the "normal" four. As a result, your scout may not be prepared when their period arrives so your group should be prepared for them.

Your group should provide access to period products at all times. Having at least pads, or both pads and tampons, in your first aid kit and in a discrete, easy-to-access place is essential. You may choose to have products in your car or truck or designate a leader to do so. This vehicle should go to all our scout meetings and events. “I need to get that thing from your truck” is easier for a scout to say than “My period just started and I need a pad.” Being able to get a pad or tampon without discussing it reduces embarrassment for the scout and keeps it private. Make sure female leaders and patrol leaders are aware and know they can access pads on behalf of scouts or themselves as needed.

All bathrooms used by scouts should always have a trash can for disposing of used products at all times. They clog plumbing, so they need a place to go when they are used. If you are running an event, be sure there is always a receptacle in all bathrooms.

Periods are often accompanied by cramps. Cramps can be debilitating. If you’ve never experienced them, assume it feels like you are being repeatedly punched in the gut. It is ideal to know for all of your scouts, if they are allowed to have pain relievers while at scouting events. Obtain parental permission at the start of the scouting year if possible, so that you know if your scouts can have Advil, Motrin, or Tylenol for headaches or cramps while camping or at other events without parents present. Be sure your first aid kit is stocked with these over-the-counter medications, and let scouts know they are available when needed. Scouts may not ask if they don’t know they are even an option.

Be willing to change chore schedules if one of your scouts develops debilitating cramps. Doing activities that involve a lot of bending at the waist and reaching can make cramps worse as those movements cause the body to press on the uterus. Yes, you can accommodate cramps just like you would accommodate a sprained ankle. Be aware that cramps are not constant or consistent during a period, and that just because a scout feels better later, or once the pain killers kick in, that doesn’t mean they were “faking it.”

## Myths and Falsehoods

1. Bears are NOT attracted to used menstrual products or blood, and neither are other wild animals. Here is an article about the topic: <https://www.livescience.com/22688-myth-bears-attack-menstruating-women.html>. Before you even think of suggesting that used products need to be stored or disposed of carefully due to wildlife, please remember that every person having their period is wearing a partially bled-on product and smells like blood. Do NOT make your scout worry they are climbing into their sleeping bag to be a bear taco, because their period arrived while camping.
2. Period blood is treated like it is dirtier than any other blood. It isn’t. It is just blood. Be sure if a scout ends up with pants covered in blood from a period, you don’t treat it differently than you would a shirt soaked in blood from a nose bleed. Have a single way you deal with blood and don’t act like period blood is different. It is just blood.
3. PMS and cramps ARE real. There are all kinds of myths about them. Don’t buy in to them, instead just trust your scouts and parents. What is true, is that people on their

periods are experiencing hormone fluctuations that can relate to mood changes. Many girls are more assertive and more aggressive during their periods. While this can mean physically aggressive, it usually means verbally. This trait is one our society has labeled in many negative ways. But the truth is, that the same traits when seen in men and boys are acceptable and even desirable.

4. If a female scout is suddenly behaving differently, more aggressive, more assertive, or more stubborn, stop before you speak. Be sure you aren't correcting a behavior in a girl that you wouldn't comment on with a boy. Just because it isn't her normal, that doesn't make it wrong. Girls are given many messages by society to not be assertive and become leaders. Do not be part of that problem. If a girl experiencing PMS signs herself up to be patrol leader, she is going to pull it off. The hormones just gave her the push to say what she really wanted.
5. Both boys and girls can experience hormone surges that make them more prone to cry and be easily upset. Be sure to never belittle any of your scouts of any gender for becoming emotional, crying, or showing their feelings. Everyone cries. Everyone gets upset. "I see you are upset. Do you need to take a break?" is an appropriate response no matter who is upset. Empower your scouts to own their feelings and not feel ashamed of them.

## In Conclusion

Periods are a normal part of life. Treat them that way. Be sure all your leaders know how to access supplies and are comfortable telling scouts where they are. Remember that this is a sensitive subject and if you are unsure of what to do, consult with some of the moms in your group.