

To Bleed or not to Bleed..... that is the Question

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Polling Question: What Percentage of reproductive age women have a 28 day cycle?

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What is 'Normal Menstruation'?

- > Only 15% of cycles in reproductive age women are 28 days in length¹
- > 20% of women experience irregular cycles¹
- > 99% of women have cycles from 21-35 days in length¹
- > Average duration of flow is 4-8 days
- > Normal volume of monthly blood loss is 5-80mls
- > The modern woman has 450-500 periods over her lifetime
 - > 3-4 times more than her Stone Age sisters

Fritz M, Speroff L. Clinical Gynecologic Endocrinology and Infertility. 8th ed. Lippincott Williams & Wilkins. P241-242

A Brief Word on Menstrual Protection



- > Women have long used washable cloths/pads as a means of collecting menstrual blood
 - > The rubber 'Hygena' was developed in the early 1900s
 - > Disposable pads, attached to a special 'sanitary belt' first became available in the 1950s
 - > Adhesive pads introduced in the 1980s
- > Vaginal plugs made from wool, paper, vegetable fibres, sponges, grass and cotton used since antiquity
- > In the 19th century tampons were cotton wads impregnated with salicylates, used to stop bleeding from bullet wounds
- > The modern menstrual tampon was invented in the 1930's and initially condemned as "dangerous and immoral"
- > Reusable menstrual cups have been around since the 1930s



Why do Women Menstruate Anyway ?



- > Menstruation has no intrinsic benefits
- > Most mammals do not menstruate- restricted to most primates, a few bats and one species of shrew
- > Two theories
 - > Necessary because the human fetus requires a more developed uterine lining- one which is too energy-inefficient to reabsorb completely¹
 - > Maternal self-defense. A thick endometrium is partly protective from the invading embryo and its placenta. That endometrium also has hormonal sensors for fetal quality and will slough if the embryo is not up to scratch²

1. Strussmann BJ. The evolution of endometrial cycles and menstruation. Q Rev Biol 1996;71 (2):181-220
2. Emeru D et al. Bioessays 34(1):26-35

Menses- Magical and Good¹

- Menstruation comes from the Greek **menus**, meaning both 'moon' and 'power'
- The menstrual cycle is laden with cultural meanings extending far beyond the medical and scientific¹
 - Tied to the waning and waxing of the moon, the tides and the earth's fertility
 - Egyptians mixed menstrual blood with red wine as a means of increasing spiritual power and as a love potion
 - During Greek Spring festivals a mixture of corn and menstrual blood was strewn on the earth so as to increase fertility
 - In the Tantric tradition men became spiritually powerful by ingesting menstrual blood
- It's even reflected in our language:
 - The word 'ritual' comes from 'ritu' which is Sanskrit for menses
 - The Polynesian 'tapua' which gave rise to 'taboo' means both sacred and menstruation
 - 'Blessing' comes from the Old English 'bloedsen' or 'bleeding' - to make 'holy with blood'

1. Owen L. Her Blood Is Gold: Celebrating the Power of Menstruation. San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993

Menses-Magical and Bad

- Blood has long associations with kinship, pain and death
- In the First Century Pliny the elder wrote that
 - 'Contact with menstrual blood turns new wine sour, crops touched with it become barren, and as gardens dry up, the fruit of the figs falls off, the edge of steel and the gleam of ivory are dulled, hives of bees die, bronze and iron are at once seized by rust, and a horrible smell fills the air; to taste it drives dogs mad and infects their licks with an incurable poison.'
- However this could be turned to use by sending menstruating women into the fields as a natural insecticide
- In the Middle Ages a popular belief was that sex with a menstruating woman would produce horribly deformed offspring
- Or that any resulting children would have red hair

Religions and Menstrual Bleeding

- In Christianity-no restrictions on the menstruating woman for the first 1200 years, then:
 - The *Corpus Iuris Canonici* (1234-1916AD) prohibited menstruating women from receiving Communion
 - Menstruating women are still not permitted to receive communion in some conservative Orthodox churches
- Religions such as Hinduism, Islam and Judaism have restrictions around sexual, social and religious practice for menstruating women or prescribe ritual cleansing after the menses



Medical Attitudes to Bleeding?

- Long held that a regular period is natural and benefits the body- words 'period' and 'cycle' imply regularity
 - The physician Galen, writing in the 1st century, was a great believer in blood-letting as a cure for many ills and theorised that a woman's regular monthly bleeds contributed to her overall health
 - For 2000 years medical literature described the disease of 'menstrual retention' which was associated with a variety of symptoms both physical and emotional
 - Herbs which induced bleeding have been used in many cultures to promote regular cycles and ensure fertility as well as for abortion
 - Modern clinicians may still prescribe the COCP to 'regulate the cycle'



From: Van de Walle E, Renne EP. Regulating menstruation: beliefs, practices, interpretations. 2000. University of Chicago Press.

Medical Attitudes to Bleeding?

- The Victorians considered menstruation a debilitating illness
 - 'At such times, women are unfit for great mental or physical labour. They suffer under a languor and depression which disqualifies them for thought or action.'¹
- But menstruation was also associated with concepts of cleansing of impurities and catharsis- so there were also problems when you stopped
 - 'The ovaries, after long years of service, have not the ability of retiring in graceful old age, but become irritated...transmit the irritation to the brain, producing disturbances in the cerebral tissue exhibiting themselves in extreme nervousness or in an outburst of actual insanity.'²

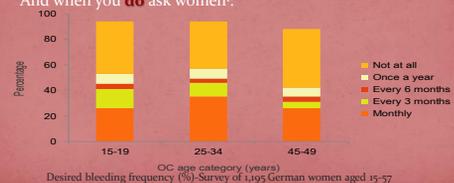


1. BMJ, January 1875

2. Farnham AM, Allenist Neurologist 1887; 8:512

Scheduled Bleeding on the COCP

- No **physiological** need for regular bleeding
- Original OCPs **were** continuous. The Pill-free break was introduced-
 - To ensure predictable 'normal' bleeding pattern and reassure re pregnancy
 - So that John Rock could present an argument to the Catholic Church that this was merely a variation of Natural Family Planning which extended the 'safe interval'
- And when you **do** ask women¹:



1. Wiegatz J, et al. Contraception 2004;69:37-43

Less Bleeding may have some Advantages..

- Reduced menstrual pain/symptoms/anaemia-useful therapeutically in women with endometriosis
- Extended cycling of COCPs formalised with marketing of preparations such as Seasonale® and Lybrel® in the 2000s
 - Benefits for peri-menopausal women experiencing break through flushes in pill-free week
 - Side effects such as pain, headaches, breast tenderness and bloating 2-3 times more common in placebo week than during active tablets¹
 - Around 2/3 of Australian students already manipulate their Pills so as to avoid regular bleeding²

¹ Salak PJ et al. *Obstet Gynaecol* 2000; 95: 261-266

² Greig AJ et al. *Sexual Reprod Health Care* 2010

Bleeding on LARCs

- Most LARCs associated with reduced bleeding loss
- BUT all but the Copper IUD are associated with unpredictable bleeding patterns
 - Studies in the late 1990s¹ suggested that unpredictable bleeding was one of the most significant reasons for method discontinuation
 - Perversely-so was amenorrhoea-particularly in Latin America and Spain,^{1,2} with 80.2% of Spanish women considering regular menses to be a necessary, natural event not to be interfered with²
- Health care professionals have an important role then in:
 - Countering the myths and misconceptions around the need for regular menstrual bleeding
 - Advising that extended bleeding on combined hormonal contraception is safe and may even hold benefits for some woman
 - Guiding expectations as to the likely bleeding patterns in those using LARCs

¹ Guttmacher Institute. *International Family Planning Perspectives*. Volume 23, Number 2, June 1997

² Sanchez-Borrego R et al. *Contraception* 2008; 77: 114-07

Curse or Blessing?

- Development of menstrual activism (otherwise known as radical menstruation, menstrual anarchy, or menarchy)
- Some Feminist writers:
 - Object to the idea that menstrual bleeding is 'messy', 'inconvenient' or needs to be suppressed-regarding any health benefits as unproven
 - Argue that pharmaceutical companies shame into taking their 'period-erasing' drugs and that such concepts pathologise the feminine
 - Contend that the menses represent a vital connection to the inner Goddess and should be a time for female spirituality and reflection
- In 1970 Germaine Greer memorably wrote that 'if you think you are emancipated, you might consider the idea of tasting your own menstrual blood - if it makes you sick, you've a long way to go, baby'

Thanks...