

An assessment of knowledge, attitude and menstrual hygiene practices among adolescent girls of Kichha block, Udham Singh Nagar

ALKA PANDEY*¹ AND RITA SINGH RAGHUVANSHI²

¹Post-Doctoral Fellow and ²Dean & Professor

¹Department of Human Development and Family Studies, College of Home Science, G.B.Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, Pantnagar (Uttarakhand) India;

²Department of Food and Nutrition and Dean, College of Home Science, G.B.Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, Pantnagar (Uttarakhand) India;

ABSTRACT

The topic of menstrual hygiene is inadequately acknowledged and has not received proper attention in our country though it is one of the most basic characteristic features of women. Use of sanitary pads and washing the genital area are essential practices to maintain the menstrual hygiene. Unhygienic menstrual practices can affect the health of the girls and there is an increased vulnerability to reproductive tract infections and pelvic inflammatory diseases and other complications. The current paper attempts to study the menstrual knowledge, attitude and practice level of 357 adolescent girls of 13-18 years lives in Kichha block of Udham Singh Nagar. A pre-designed, pretested and self-structured questionnaire was used for this purpose. Results of the study indicate the common practices followed by these young girls and the societal restrictions placed upon them during this period. It was also found that there is an urgent need to provide appropriate information to young girls regarding the process of menstruation and basic hygiene practices to be adopted to avoid genital problems.

Key Words : Menstruation, Customs, Practices, Restrictions

INTRODUCTION

Menstruation is a phenomenon unique to the females (WHO, 2003). The onset of menstruation is one of the most important changes occurring among the girls during the adolescent years. The first menstruation (menarche) occurs between 11 and 15 years with a mean of 13 years (Banerjee *et al.*, 2007).

Adolescent girls constitute a vulnerable group, particularly in India where female child is neglected one. Menstruation is still regarded as something unclean or dirty in Indian society. The reaction to menstruation depends upon awareness and knowledge about the subject. The manner in which a girl learns about menstruation and its associated changes may have an impact on her response to the event of menarche. Although menstruation is a natural process, it is linked with several misconceptions and practices, which sometimes result into adverse health outcomes.

Adolescent menstrual hygiene and self-care is a critical issue that determines the health status of the adolescent and the eventual practices that are inculcated into adult life (Uzochukwu *et al.*, 2009). Poor hygiene and inadequate self-care practices are major determinants of morbidity and other complications among this age group (McCaleb and Cull, 2000). However, it is interesting to see how some girls develop their own strategies to cope.

Women having better knowledge regarding menstrual hygiene and safe practices are less vulnerable to RTI and its consequences. Therefore, increased knowledge about menstruation right from childhood may escalate safe practices and may help in mitigating the suffering of millions of women.

Objectives :

This study was undertaken with the following objectives:

- To know the beliefs, conception and source of information regarding menstruation among the study population.
- To find out the status of menstrual hygiene among adolescent girls of Kichha block of Udham Singh Nagar.
- To assess the restrictions practiced by rural Indian girls during menstruation.

METHODOLOGY

Local of the study and selection of sample :

The study was conducted in Kichha block of Udham Singh Nagar, Uttarakhand India. Respondents belonged to 13-18 years were the study population. From each class 59 adolescent girls studying in 7 to 12 standard were selected as a sample of my study. Total 357 adolescent girls were selected for the present study.

Study Design, Tools and Techniques :

The research was carried out from 26 Oct. 2016 to 25 Oct. 2017. A pre-designed, pretested and self-structured questionnaire was prepared and used for the collection of data. Schools for the study purpose were selected randomly from each block but students from each class were selected purposively for data collection. Only those respondents who were willing to fill the questionnaire were included for the study purpose.

Procedure :

The purpose and the nature of the study were explained to the respondents. Questionnaire which were used for the study included topics related to the awareness about menstruation, the sources of information regarding menstruation, the hygienic practices during menstruation and the restricted activities practiced during menstruation. The chronological age and the age at menarche were also elucidated under general information. The menstrual hygiene questionnaire included queries about the type of absorbent which was used, its storage place, the use of clean or unclean napkins and the frequencies of changing and cleaning them. The information about personal hygiene included washing and bathing during menses, the practice of wearing stained clothes, etc.

Data analysis :

Quantitative data from the survey was analysed using proportions through Windows Microsoft

Excel software. Frequency and percentages were calculated for data analysis.

Ethical consideration :

Rights, anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents were respected at all the stages of study. Informed verbal consent was taken from the respondents before collecting data. Through verbal consent process, the type and purpose of the survey; issues of anonymity and confidentiality; voluntary participation and freedom to discontinue to fill the questionnaire at any stage; and absence of any known risk or benefit for participating in the study was explained beforehand. To preserve anonymity, all findings are presented without ascribing names or identifiable personal description. All participants were informed, that their participation is voluntary and that the collected data would be only used for the purpose of the study as well as for their benefit.

Limitations of the study :

- The respondents were selected purposively. Only those respondents who were willing to fill the questionnaire were selected for the study.
- Findings of this study cannot be generalized to all the blocks of Udham Singh Nagar, until separate study will not be conducted for the different blocks and the data will not be co-related among blocks.
- The survey questionnaires though made in Hindi contained some technical terms; many respondents had difficulty in understanding parts of it. The researcher acted as translator by explaining the terms to them.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data in Table 1 indicates that only 28.5 per cent participants were aware about menstruation before reaching menarche, majority of the girls were not even aware of the process of menstruation prior to beginning with menarche while in a study conducted among school going adolescent girls in Nagpur reported that 36.9% of their subjects knew about menstruation before attaining menarche (Thakre *et al.*, 2011). Studies conducted with adolescent girls in Tanzania, Kenya, Ghana, Uganda and Zimbabwe have all found confusion over the menstrual cycle, menstrual patterns, and an absence of pragmatic menstrual-related guidance provided to girls pre- and sometimes even post menarche (McMaster *et al.*, 2009; Sommer, 2009; Fehr, 2011; McMahan *et al.*, 2011; Crofts and Fisher, 2012; Sommer and Ackatia-Armah, 2012). A series of articles from India also indicated insufficient knowledge about menstruation among girls, particularly pre-menarche (Gupta and Vatsayan 1996; Dhingra *et al.*, 2007; Nemade *et al.*, 2009).

The most important sources of providing the information related to menarche were mothers, sisters too played an important role here along with friends and teachers. As reported by the girls since menstruation is a 'hush-hush' topic in the families, they normally don't come to know, until beginning with their first period. Mothers have always been identified as an important source of providing information on menstruation for the girls, as also shown by some other studies to a varying degree (Dasgupta and Sarkar, 2008; El-Gilany *et al.*, 2005). The rising literacy levels, increasing awareness amongst women along with decreasing inhibitions in talking to their daughters have been understood as the reason for disseminating information. Other sources of information regarding menarche were sisters, friends and teachers for the girls. These findings were consistent with those of other studies (Khanna *et al.*, 2005; Mudey *et al.*, 2010; Dasgupta and Sarkar, 2008).

Table 1 : Information about menarche and perception related to menstruation amongst rural girl (n=357)
Information about menarche

Information about menarche	No. (%)
Awareness about menstruation before menarche	
Yes	102(28.5)
No	255(71.4)
Source of information before menarche	
Mother	175(49.04)
Sister	78(21.84)
Friend	41(11.48)
Teachers	22(6.16)
Others	41(11.48)
What is the cause of menstruation?	
Don't Know	189(52)
Physiological	69(19.32)
Curse of god	99(27.73)
What absorbent should ideally be used during menstruation?	
Sanitary pad	184(51.54)
Cloth	101(28.29)
Other	72(20.16)

Since, mothers are the closest and safe modes imparting knowledge about the process, the mothers consider it as their responsibility to impart knowledge about menstruation to their girls. Some of the girls, who have attained menarche before others, become a source of information to others, while sources like television, books, and magazines too have become sources of gaining information. Teachers as reported by the girls were hardly a source of information to them, for they did not feel comfortable talking to the girls, in many cases the syllabus portion comprising of information related to female anatomy were skipped or left for self- study.

Study also revealed that 71.4 per cent study subjects were not aware of the reason behind occurrence of menstruation. 27.73 per cent believed that menstruation is a curse of God. Only 12 per cent of the girls were aware of uterus being the source of blood flowing during the menstrual cycle while a majority of girls *i.e.* 55.33 per cent were not of the same. Dasgupta and Sarkar (2008) in their study found that majority of the girls did not know about the cause of menstruation while 29(19.33) believed it to be a physiological process, whereas referring to previous done researches in a similar study, 86.25% believed it to be a physiological process. In a similar study carried out in Rajasthan by Khanna *et al.* (2005) nearly 70 per cent believed that menstruation was not natural process. It is surprising that majority of the girls even did not know the sources of menstrual bleeding.

51.54 per cent of girls reported that sanitary pads should ideally be used during the menstruation. But only 28.01 per cent actually use it during menstruation. Practice of menstrual hygiene amongst the rural girls in Table 2 reveals that while 62.46 per cent girls used old cloths and 9.08 per cent used new cloth during menstruation. According to the Baridalyne and Reddaiah study which they conducted in 2004, 61(40.67) girls felt that ideally old cloth should be used during menstruation, in the study by, only one-third of the study subjects used sanitary pads as absorbents. The easy availability of cloth and the high cost of sanitary napkins becomes a reason for preferring cloth over

Table 2 : Practise of menstrual hygiene amongst the rural girls (n=357)

Menstrual hygiene practices	No. (%)
Use of material during menstruation	
Sanitary pad	100(28.01)
Old cloth	223(62.46)
New cloth	35(9.80)
Material used for cleaning of External genitalia	
Only water	210(58.82)
Soap and Water	142(39.77)
Water and antiseptic	5(1.40)
Storage of absorbent	
Bathroom	172(48.17)
Don't store	110(30.81)
Store with routine cloth	60(16.80)
Others	15(4.20)
Method of disposal	
Burn it	200(56.02)
Throw it in routine waste	58(16.24)
Others (Don't dispose/Flush/Hide)	99(27.73)
Places of drying	
Outside house in the sunlight	182(50.98)
Inside house	139(38.93)
outside house without sunlight	36(10.08)
Change of pad in school	
Yes	56(15.68)
No	301(84.31)
Toilet facility at home	
Yes	316(88.51)
No	18(11.49)

sanitary pads. The type of absorbent material which is used is of primary concern, since reuse of the material could be a cause for infection if it is improperly cleaned and poorly stored (E.L. Gilany *et al.*, 2005). Despite of the uneasiness being felt due to use of cloth, it still remains the preferred means for them, due to its easy availability and low cost, while feeling ashamed in purchasing sanitary napkins, their high cost and low availability in the area leads to less use of sanitary napkins.

Present study reveals that only 1.90 per cent girls used water and antiseptic for cleaning the external genitalia, while a majority of girls (48.17%) used only water, a figure that is higher than the 45% reported by Drakshayani and Venkata (1994), from a study among rural adolescent girls of Andhra Pradesh. As indicated by the results, the majority of them used only water to wash their genital area, not knowing the importance of maintaining cleanliness in the genital area, which would further help them avoid various genital related problems. Very few used water and antiseptic to wash the genital areas, thus making them safe against various problems related to female genitals, since antiseptic helps in killing germs and bacteria while also preventing their growth.

It is also important that the place where the absorbent material is stored in clean and hygienic. In the present study it was also found that the girls disposed the used absorbents by carefully

wrapping them in sheets of papers and polythene and then mostly burning it with other household waste. Similar findings were reported in the study done by Omidwar and Begum (2010); Mudey *et al.* (2010); and Dasgupta and Sarkar (2008). In contrast to high-income urban areas where modern disposable menstrual hygiene products are proliferating and increasingly disposed of through centralized solid waste management systems (Ashley *et al.*, 2005), in low-income areas there were found to be a range of options used for disposing of menstrual materials in the home. These included burning, burying, throwing in the waste bin, pit latrine or flushing. Inadequate disposal systems and relevant menstrual disposal knowledge resulted in clogged toilets and pollution of streams with used materials. In a study it was also found that 43% of girls bury their used materials, 35% throw the used materials with other waste, and 19% burn the materials (Water Aid, 2009), which at times causes problems like clogging of toilet and polluting the local environment like streams in villages.

Survey data also reported that Majority of the girls stored the absorbents in the bathroom which is similar to another study where the proportion of the participants who used the bathroom as a storage place was as high as 49.8% (Narayan *et al.*, 2001). 16.24 per cents stored it with routine cloth. 30.87 don't store cloths for menstruation. Method of disposal adopted by girls were also differ, 56 per cent girls burnt the menstrual material while 27.73 per cent don't dispose/ flush /hide the material.

Some girls who reused the cloth used during menstruation dried them either inside the house or outside in the sunlight. Majority of the girls dried the cloth outside in the sunlight 50.98 per cent, while 38.93 per cent dried it inside the house, still 10.08 per cent were found to be drying the outside but without sunlight. Though majority of girls were found to be drying their absorbent material, cloth in this case, outside in the sun, it was also found that the rest of them did not dry the cloth in the sunlight, thus giving birth to various germs leading to problems experienced by them in the genital area, like itching, rashes, abrasions, urinary tract infections, as reported by the girls. In a study by Subhash *et al.* (2011), it was found that in cases of reused cloth, the places of its drying which were observed, was outside the house in sunlight in 51.32 per cent subjects, 47.37 per cent dried them inside the house, and, 4.94 per cent subjects dried them outside without sunlight.

In the present study, a very small proportion of the girls changed the pads at school hours. Surprisingly it was found that 84.31 per cent did not change the pad in the school, interestingly 88.51 per cent has toilets in their home. Other researchers too reported that 20.6% of the girls changed the pads at school hours (Omidwar and Begum, 2010). The probable reason for the girls not changing the pads could be ignorance and lack of facilities. The girls also reported that in many the schools they did not have separate toilet facilities for girls and the washrooms meant for teachers were not open to the girls for they would make them 'dirty'.

Table 3 shows a detailed representation of the various kinds of restrictions placed on the girls during menstruation. These are followed in the same way as have been practised by their mothers or other elderly female in the family, due to their ignorance and false perceptions about menstruation. The girls reported being unable to understand the reason for such discrimination and restrictions, practiced and followed without any valid reasons, yet not having the courage to disobey their elders. 83.47 per cent of the girls practiced these restrictions only 16.53 per cent of girls among the total studied group did not practice any restriction during menstruation. Majority girls 81.51 did not attend any religious function, 61.62. Per cent girls were not allowed to touch stored food and 58.82 per cent were allowed to attend school. Garg *et al.* (2001), reported that the vast majority of girls in a Delhi slum continue to experience restrictions on cooking, work activities, sexual intercourse,

bathing and religious practice during menstruation. The overall perception is that menstrual fluid is dirty and polluting, which occasions much secrecy around its management. In contrast, Dhingra *et al.* (2009), describe menstrual taboos among the Gujjar tribe of the Kashmir and Sammu regions of India, who lead a semi-nomadic existence. Their research with adolescent girls found there were restrictions on bodily washing and a taboo against burying a bloodied menstrual cloth. Cloths could only be washed and then buried or reused. Most girls reported washing the cloths secretly and drying them in a hidden corner, not in the sun, lest they be seen by others. Restrictions symbolize a woman's ritually dangerous status (Narayan *et al.*, 2001) that, as fuelled by myths, misconceptions, superstitions and taboos, is believed to have the potential to spoil food, plant, biological and social processes.

Table 3 : Restrictions practiced during menstruation (* Multiple responses)

Restrictions	No. (%)
Restrictions not practiced	59(16.53)
Restrictions practiced for*	298(83.47)
Attend religious functions	291(81.51)
Household work	109(30.53)
Touch stored food	220(61.62)
Sleep on routine bed	101(28.29)
Touch family members	177(49.57)
Play outside	162(45.37)
Not allowed to go to school	210(58.82)

Recommendations :

- Present study highlights the need to provide accurate and adequate information about menstruation to young girls and its appropriate management.
- Formal as well as informal channels of communication need to be sensitized towards the issue while emphasis should be laid on deliverance of correct information.
- There is a strong need to address issues like the restrictions which are imposed on or practiced by the girls which have been followed through generations in ignorance.
- Appropriate information regarding use of sanitary napkins, cloth and their disposal should be provided to girls in premenstrual stage and later.

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