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**Introduction**

Menstruation is a key indicator of health and vitality for school girls. However, the girls have to manage it hygienically and with dignity. Managing it hygienically is an integral path of good sanitation and hygiene that significantly increases the enrolment, educational participation and academic performance of girls in school. Hence, it is necessary to empower and establish an enabling environment for the school girls in order to manage their menstruation hygienically, with dignity, safety and with self-respect.

*Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) is defined as: “Women and adolescent girls are using clean menstrual management material to absorb or collect menstrual blood, that can be changed in privacy as often as necessary for the duration of the menstruation period, using soap and water for washing the body as required, and having access to facilities to dispose of used menstrual management materials. They understand the basic facts linked to the menstrual cycle and how to manage it with dignity and without discomfort or fear.”*

Educating school girls and boys (classmates) about menstruation and supporting them in management is very crucial. The girls have to talk about menstruation openly so that they can develop good understanding, confidence and skills to manage their menstruation with pride and dignity and dispose used menstrual material safely without further endangering the environment.

The teachers play a key role in educating and supporting the school girls to manage their menses hygienically with pride and dignity. However, in order to educate and support the girls the teachers need to have a good knowledge and understanding about MHM. Hence, the Ministry of Education has prepared this booklet to enhance the knowledge and understanding of the teachers about Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM).

The booklet covers some important issues that provide you information about biology of menstruation, MHM materials, experiences and practices by school girls including the disabled ones and environment friendly waste disposal options.

The study done and the challenges the girls are facing in schools and the knowledge of the teachers support was very limited

It serves you as a source of information in educating and supporting the school girls. You can also use the girls’ booklet: your body as it grows.
2. Biology of Menstruation
This section includes the meaning, cycle, and common symptoms of menstruation and brief description about puberty.

2.1 What is Menstruation?

- Menstruation is an indication of growing up and an important developmental milestone of a girl.
- It is shedding of tissue blood from the lining of the uterus through a woman’s vagina.
- It is the tissue that comes from the uterus blood when fertilization does not occur.
- It is also called 'menses', 'menstrual period', 'monthly bleeding' and 'period'.
- It is a normal and natural part of biological maturity.
- It is normal for every woman, including the differently abled.
- It is not a women's issue but a universal issue – men need to know about it too!
- There are many myths and misconceptions on menstruation.

**Menstruation is not:** Illness, disease, infection, harmful, dirty, shameful, unclean or otherwise ‘negative’

2.2 Menstrual cycle

**Key messages**
- The first menstrual cycle is called ‘menarche’.
- Periods in the first few years of menstruation are not very regular.
- Some girls have their first period as early as ten years of age. However majority between 12-16 years
- Some women menstruate every 28 days, while others have longer cycles (35 days) or shorter cycles (21 days).
- Periods usually last from 3-7 days, with 5 days being the average length of menstrual flow.
2.4 **Common symptoms that occur before or at the onset of menstruation:**

- General weakness of the body; feeling discomfort
- Nausea, cramps/lower abdominal pain.
- Headache, Backache enlarged and painful breasts, fever.
- Irritability, depression, dizziness, tiredness,
- Pimples, etc

2.5 **Puberty**

- *It is a biological process* where boys’ and girls’ experience rapid growth and their bodies begin to develop and look more like adults.
- It is an important dimension that young adolescents be able to integrate bodily changes into their self-identity, and to incorporate others’ responses to these changes into that self-identity.
- It occurs at different age, related to sex, nutrition, environment, etc.
  - Girls: 10-11
  - Boys: 11-12
- Experienced differently by girls and boys
  - **Girls:** breasts appear, hips get wider, pubic and underarm hair, first menstruation (menarche)
  - **Boys:** facial hair appears, pubic and underarm hair, first ejaculation (semanarche)
2.6 Physical growth of girls and boys at puberty

3. Current menstrual experiences of middle school girls in Eritrea

3.1 Challenges of school girls and their determinants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Determinants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor management / leaks and stains</td>
<td>• Insufficient school WASH facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Difficulty in preventing leaks and stains, • worry and shame associated</td>
<td>• Lack of information, support, and communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Irregular cycles.</td>
<td>• Cultural practices and beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Menstrual pain</td>
<td>• Lack of access to MHM materials and pain management options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Impaired activities and participation at school.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Causes school absenteeism.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Teasing and gossip</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Emotional distress
• Social isolation
• Decreases participation in class
• Absenteeism

**Odour**
• Though mentioned by a few girls, it is a driver for social isolation and absenteeism.

### 3.2 Impacts
The current MHM experiences have educational and psychosocial impacts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational:</th>
<th>Psychosocial Impacts:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Absenteeism, decreased participation in class, decreased concentration, and punishments for absence</td>
<td>• Emotional distress, social isolation, impaired health, early marriage and dropouts due to fear of pregnancy before marriage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4. Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) Materials
There are different ranges of MHM materials for women and girls. These materials have their own advantages and disadvantages.

#### 4.1 Stitched pads:
Made of cloth that is washable. They can be prepared either new or from old clothes, blankets, towels.
4.2 Disposable pads

4.3 Advantages and disadvantages of the different type of sanitary materials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>a. Cotton Cloth pad</strong></td>
<td>• Easily available</td>
<td>• Gets soaked fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Low / no cost</td>
<td>• Difficulty in changing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Washable / Reusable</td>
<td>• Repeatedly use causes abrasions in the thigh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Improper washing, drying and storage causes infections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>b. Sanitary napkin:</strong></td>
<td>• Safe and hygienic</td>
<td>• Costly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• High Soaking capacity</td>
<td>• Not biodegradable, making disposal difficult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Comfortable</td>
<td>• Prolonged use of a single napkin causes infection and diseases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Convenient to change</td>
<td>• Not reusable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Convenient to carry</td>
<td>• Latrines/toilets /drains can get choked if napkins are disposed there</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Easily available (except in some remote rural areas)</td>
<td>• Can cause environmental pollution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Light weight</td>
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</table>
5. **Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) practices by school girls**

Availability of affordable and appropriate sanitary materials and knowledge of the school girls about MHM and the use of the materials determine the good practices.

### 5.1 Good practices of menstrual hygiene by school girls

- Availability of sanitary protection material.
- Clean and separate toilets
- Place for washing and drying.
- Disposal facilities
- Supportive teachers / staff.

### 5.2 Menstrual hygiene is important because it:

- Prevents infection and body odor.
- Enables girls to remain healthy and feel comfortable, confident and stay fresh all day.

### 5.3 Using and maintaining the sanitary materials

#### a. Safety and hygiene in using these materials

- **Cloth pad:**
  - A set of cloth is advised to be used for just 2-3 months of menstruation cycle or until the cloth starts to become hard to wash.
  - Before changing and after changing, wash your hands with soap.
  - Do not hesitate to carry menstrual waste for safe disposal (by wrapping in newspaper).
  - Female family members or friends should not interchange their menstrual cloth.

- **Sanitary pads:**
  - Do not throw sanitary napkins in toilets.
  - Do not use one napkin for more than 6 hours.

#### b. Handling the menstrual blood:

- Wash hands with water and soap after contact with menstrual blood.
- Set aside soiled clothing and bed sheets from other clothes before washing and drying separately.

#### c. Cleaning the blood-stained rags, clothes, bed sheets and for reuse

- Soak the soiled material in soapy water for 20 minutes. Make sure there are enough soap in the water, and plenty of bubbles when you shake the water with your hand.
- Wash the soiled material as you would normally with soap and water.
- Allow the cleaned materials to dry in the sun. Discard the dirty soaking water in the toilet.
- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water.
d. Washing and cleaning the body:
  • During menstruation wash the body including the genital area daily with warm, clean water and mild soap.
  • Always pat the area dry after cleaning it

5.4 Ways of minimizing poor menstrual hygiene
  • Hygiene education and promotion for women/girls.
    • Education for young girls (primary and post-primary).
    • Proper washing of vulva and hands with soap and water

6. MHM practices by disabled girls

You need to identify and know the students with special needs in the class and make special arrangements for these students.

6.1 For blind or visually impaired girls:
  • It may be difficult for a blind adolescent girl to identify her period initially as she will be unable to see the menstrual blood. However, over the course of few months, she will understand her menstrual cycle, i.e. how it feels and sense its timing. Therefore useful advice would be:
    • Emphasize the hormone-triggered emotional changes that occur during the menstrual cycle, to create awareness on menstruation.
    • Motivate them to take support from family members or someone she trusts to check if there is any blood on her clothing.

6.2 For girls who are deaf or has difficulty in hearing:
  • Use visual aids to explain menstruation and hygiene management practices

6.3 For Girls who have a physical disability
  • Talk to the girls to understand and assess the kind of facilities they require for managing menstruation.
  • Guide them on how they can work with their family and support group to make provisions for these facilities, which include:
    • A toilet and bathing space equipped with railings.
• Doors that open outward rather than inward.
• Water taps that are within their reach.
• Storage of cloth and sanitary napkins in a place within their reach

6.4 For girls who are mentally challenged;
• Ask participants if they have family, friends or neighbors that are mentally challenged. To be improved by Mr. Mokenen
• Discuss how and what kind of support is needed to help them with menstrual hygiene management

7. Environment friendly disposal options
There are two main environment friendly options to dispose the MHM sanitary materials. Some materials are reusable and others are disposable. Girls can use either of them but they need to use them hygienically.

6.1 Reuse
• To clean blood-stained rags, clothes, bed sheets and used as sanitary napkin, do the following:
• Soak the soiled materials in soapy water for 20 minutes. Make sure that there is enough soap in the water, and a lot of bubbles when you stir and shake the water with your hand.
• Wash the soiled materials as you would normally with soap and water.
• Allow the cleaned materials to air dry in the sun. Dispose the waste water in the toilet.
• Wash your hands thoroughly with water and soap

6.2 Disposal
• Blood stained materials can contaminate the environment and spread diseases if not properly disposed, so it is crucial to emphasize the need for proper disposal of menstrual waste.
• Reiterate that girls should not throw soiled cloths or napkins in latrines or toilets, open drains, water bodies (streams, rivers, ponds, and wells) and so on.
Collection of Used Cloths and Sanitary Pads

- This collection system should ideally be administered by a group of girls or a staff appointed by the school.
- Collection bins should be placed in locations identified by girls and female teachers.
- Collection bins should have lids on top to keep the waste protected from flies and animals. (See collection bins on the left) Once collected, menstrual waste can be buried, composted or incinerated depending on available resources in school

Privacy is a key factor in determining the location of menstrual waste disposal and collection facilities on school premises.

The following methods are suggested for the collection and disposal of used cloth and napkins in schools:

a. Deep Burial

- Used cloth and / or sanitary napkins could be buried in a simple pit.
- Dig a pit 0.5m wide x 0.5m breadth x 1m deep.
- A pit of this size can last for two years. Once filled, another pit can be dug and used.
- Cover the material with a layer of soil
- Such pits should be dug a minimum of seven meters away from water sources, including hand pumps, tube wells, open wells, ponds, reservoirs and rivers.
b. Composting: This is an improvement over the deep burial method

- Used cloth and / or sanitary napkins could be buried in a simple pit.
- Deposit the waste cloth and sanitary napkins along with leaves, other wet biomass and dung slurry
- The additional material needs to be added every time cloths or napkins are disposed.
- Cover the material with a layer of soil.
- The pit should be located in an open space in the school premises in a location selected by the girls. Once it is filled, another pit can be dug and used.
- A teacher or member of staff from the school should help with adding these materials and preparing the compost.
- Compost can be used by the community or a kitchen garden around the school.

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8. Teachers’ Support to school girls

Knowledge and skills of the girls, WASH facilities, and availability of sanitary materials are necessary but not independently sufficient for addressing and ameliorating menstruation-related challenges at school. They need support from their teachers. Thus, you should:

- give sufficient orientations about the existing school WASH facilities and their proper utilizations,
- Provide continues guidance about MHM and organize different activities that could promote the knowledge, skills and attitudes of the school girls
- Implement MHM related co-curricular activities

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8.1 Sufficient orientations to the school girls about School WASH facilities

- Provide sufficient information to the school girls about the available school WASH facilities and their proper utilizations:
- The WASH facilities include toilets and water, MHM materials as well as the waste disposal options.
- You should also ensure that the facilities are safe, secure and accessible to the girls.
• Explain to the students about the importance and their roles in keeping the facilities clean while they use them

### 8.2 Providing Continuous guidance to the school girls

You need to be well aware of the frequently asked questions by the students about menstruation and proper MHM practices.

**a. Questions about Biology of menstruation**

- **Menarche age**

  Q: At what age does a girl start menstruating?
  A: Some girls begin to menstruate as early as age 10 and some may not get their first period until a few years later.

- **Amount of blood flow**

  Q: How much flow is there normally?
  A: Menstrual flow can vary from person to person. Usually, an entire period consists of 30-80 ml of blood.

- **Duration of menstruation cycle**

  Q: How long should a girl's period last?
  A: The duration of a menstrual period can vary from girl to girl but is typically 3-7 days long. One girl might have three-day periods while another might have six-day periods. In some cases, the length of the period can vary from month to month. For example, in the first month, a girl's period might last four days, and then the next month it could be six days.

- **Girls’ behavior**

  Q: How does the body feel during menstruation?
  A: Sometimes a girl may experience physical or emotional changes around the time of her period, while others may not feel any change in moods or body. Physical changes include: cramps, pain, bloating, weight gain, food cravings, painful breasts, headache, dizziness or irritability. Emotional changes include: short temper, aggression, anger, anxiety or panic, confusion, lack of concentration, nervousness, tension, fatigue or depression.
• Absence of menstruation
Q: What if a girl’s period stops but she is sure that she is not pregnant?
A: The absence of menstruation is called amenorrhea. This is not usually a concern unless it occurs for several months, in which case they should consult a medical professional.

b. Questions related to cultural beliefs and practices of MHM
Q: Are girls unclean and impure during periods?
A: There is no impurity in the blood associated with menstruation. Cleanliness and hygiene are important to the menstrual flow, to keep away any odor or infection.

c. Questions about menstrual sanitary materials
Q: Should girls use only sanitary napkins?
A: No. Clean and dry cotton cloth can be made into a pad for absorbing menstrual blood.

d. Questions about management practices of menstrual hygiene
Q: What kinds of food should be avoided during periods?
A: Eat regular foods such as vegetables, roti, rice and pulses, lots of fiber, and drink plenty of water to avoid constipation, as it can lead to an increase in pain from menstrual cramps. Cutting down on salty foods and sugar will prevent the water retention in the body.
Q: What can be done to relieve menstrual cramps?
A: Place a hot water bottle on the abdomen or on the back, depending on the cramps’ location. Take a warm bath. Drink a hot beverage, such as tea. Take a walk. Rub or massage the abdomen. Get on your elbows and knees so that the uterus is hanging down, which helps it to relax. Lie on your back with knees up and move them in small circles.
Q: Is it risky and dangerous to engage in sports and games during menstruation?
A: No, but if you feel tired and feel the need to rest then rest is advised.

8.3 Implementation of MHM related Co-curricular activities
The provision of formal lessons, orientation about WASH facilities and guidance alone are not enough to promote proper MHM practices by school girls; therefore, you need to;
• Organize co-curricular activities that help the girls to develop certain social and practical skills about MHM practices.
• make them engaged in MHM related co-curricular activities to discuss openly and critically about the different beliefs and restrictions of the community about MHM practices with their peers
• form and lead the club and make sure that an action plan is prepared by the girls themselves and the plan has to include activities such as:-
  o discussion sessions with peers, older girls, experience sharing with younger girls,
  o making of local MHM sanitary materials,
  o provision of emergency services of sanitary materials in the school,
  o Assessment of the current MHM practices in the community etc.
• monitor the implementation of the action plan of the club and;
• Provide the club members timely and constructive feedbacks that help them to make improvement.

Reference: