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FAIR TREATMENT FOR
THE WOMEN OF WALES

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FTWW's Pocket Period Myth-Buster

**FTWW IS THE ONLY PATIENT-LED ORGANISATION IN WALES
DEDICATED SOLELY TO WOMEN'S HEALTH EQUALITY**

Period (Menstruation) Myths

Half of the world's population experiences menstruation, and yet myths about this biological process still abound – so here's **FTWW's Pocket Period Myth-Buster**, with the TRUTHS you need to counter those fictions, no matter where you hear them!

First of all though...

✗ *What exactly is a 'Period'?*

✓ **Periods - or 'menstruation' - are part of the menstrual cycle in which the uterus sheds tissue alongside blood, through the vagina. For most women this happens every 28 days, but it's common for periods to be more or less frequent than this. And whilst they last an average of 5 days, plenty of people have shorter or longer periods. Bleeding tends to be heaviest in the first 2 days, when it'll be red. On lighter days, it may be pink, brown or black.**

✗ *Periods – they're a lifelong thing, right'?*

- ✓ Wrong – although it might sometimes feel like it! Periods usually begin at around the age of 12, although some girls will start them earlier or later. Most girls will be having regular periods by age 16 to 18.

Periods generally stop during pregnancy and breast-feeding and continue until menopause (typically around age 51). For more about the menopause, see FTWW's *Menopause Myth-Buster*.

The average number of periods per year is 13, and as we have them for about 35 years of our lives, that means that most women will have around 451 periods over a lifetime!

✗ *'It's normal to have painful periods – just get on with it'!*

- ✓ OK – it's normal to experience a bit of discomfort, even mild cramps or tummy ache just before and at the start of your period (the medical term being 'dysmenorrhea').

You might also have some lower back or thigh ache. That's because the uterus has to do some serious contractions to expel its lining (period blood) if you're not pregnant.

It may even be 'normal' to have a few twinges in between periods, when your ovaries are releasing an egg. However, pain that lasts throughout the month, and/or is severe enough to interfere with daily activities like sleep, going to school/work, or stops you moving around as you would usually, shouldn't be ignored or dismissed as 'normal pain'! It needs to be investigated by a doctor.

If you find that your period pain is accompanied by feeling or being sick, suffering extreme fatigue, even fainting, then those things need reporting to your GP too. Causes of severe period pain can include conditions like endometriosis, adenomyosis, fibroids, and infections, so do get checked out – it isn't OK to not feel 'OK'.

✗ *'Bleeding through pads? Just wear more of them'!*

✓ Sure, you can do that – but you also need to get it checked out by a medical professional. Heavy menstrual bleeding which interferes with your daily activities – aka **menorrhagia** - is defined by one or more the following:

- menstrual bleeding which lasts for more than 7 days
- severe menstrual bleeding for less than 7 days
- having to change soaked period products (pads or large tampons) every hour or two
- passing blood clots larger than 2.5cm (about the size of a 10p coin)
- bleeding through your clothes or bedding
- needing to use 2 period products (pads / tampons / cups etc) at the same time.

There are lots of causes for heavy periods, so don't suffer in silence. Remember too, prolonged heavy blood loss can make you anaemic, so ask your doctor about that as well.

✗ *PMS – an excuse women use to be bad-tempered, right?*

✓ Wrong! PMS (premenstrual syndrome) is the name for the very real symptoms some women and girls experience in the weeks before their period, as a result of changes in hormone levels. These can vary from month to month but commonly include: mood swings; feeling upset, anxious or irritable; tiredness or trouble sleeping; bloating or tummy pain; breast tenderness; headaches; spotty skin or greasy hair; changes in appetite and sex drive.

A small number of women may experience more severe symptoms of PMS known as **premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD)**. PMDD can impact on a person's ability to function, carry out daily tasks, work and maintain relationships. And if you're wondering about the 'Dysphoria' bit, well, basically, if you think about the word 'euphoria', which means a state of intense happiness and self-confidence, it's the opposite of that! Think dissatisfaction, anxiety, restlessness, depression and self-loathing...Anyone feeling like this needs to seek medical attention, so don't delay!

✗ *You can't get pregnant if you have sex whilst on your period*

✓ NOT true, so don't stop using contraception if you're wanting to avoid pregnancy (and don't forget that condoms also protect against sexually transmitted infections). Also, just to complicate things further, sperm can live inside the genital tract for between 5 and 7 days! That means that if you have unprotected vaginal sex during your period, the sperm gets to linger for just long enough that it could coincide with ovulation and fertilize an egg, resulting in pregnancy.

✗ *You smell when you're on your period.*

✓ It's totally normal for your period blood to have a certain scent to it and it's nothing about which to be embarrassed or ashamed. Besides, so long as you're bathing regularly (and, yes, it's fine to bathe / shower / wash your hair during your period – that's another myth!) and changing your period products as per the recommendations, then only you will know that you're having your period.

✗ *Using the Pill to skip periods? Dangerous, surely?*

✓ Doctors now agree that there is no medical need to have a period when you're on the pill. The truth is, you're not even having a true period when you're taking the pill in any case! It's called a **withdrawal bleed** and, since you're not building up your uterine lining whilst you're on birth control pills, it's unnecessary. If you wish to skip your periods for convenience, or to provide relief from symptoms of a diagnosed gynaecological condition, then using birth control pills to do so is generally considered perfectly safe. Nevertheless, always check with your own doctor before changing how / when you use your medication, OK?

✗ *It's not polite to talk publicly about periods*

✓ Wrong! It's vital we break down the taboos around periods so that everyone can get the accurate information they need, especially if it means accessing healthcare in a timely fashion. We need to talk about periods - period!

You can find us at www.ftww.co.uk or on Facebook.

Other useful links:

<https://iapmd.org/>

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/periods/>

<https://www.rcog.org.uk/en/patients/>



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