

CHALLENGES FACING MENSTRUATING ADOLESCENTS: A REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH APPROACH

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Abstract

Menstruation is a universal and natural occurrence that affects every female of reproductive age. Regardless, this stage is accompanied by a variety of challenges, particularly among adolescents. Using literature on adolescent reproductive health, this paper focused solely on the challenges faced by menstruating adolescents. Out of many challenges facing the menstruating adolescent, the paper uncovered two which are problem of hygiene and psychological distress. This paper then suggests that governments address adolescent menstrual health, which is a significant public health issue, by organizing workshops and seminars to educate parents, teachers, adolescent girls, and the general public about the serious dangers of unsanitary menstrual practices and providing enabling environments for frequent absorbent changes. It is also recommended that parents and significant others counsel and provide a supportive environment for emerging adolescents on how to control the symptoms and severity of menstruation in order to reduce the psychological distress experienced by adolescents.

Keywords: Adolescents, Menstruation, Challenges, Hygiene, psychological Distress

Introduction

Menstruation is a natural and biological process that all women and girls of reproductive age go through. Nonetheless, despite its natural and unavoidable experiences, it has been identified as one of the major concerns of females, particularly adolescents who have little or no knowledge of menstruation prior to the start of their menstrual cycle. Adolescence appears to be defined as the period between the ages of 12 and 19, and it is reasonable to assume that a significant proportion of these adolescents are not exposed to menstrual hygiene management. Menstruation is defined as the monthly discharge of blood and tissue from the uterus that begins at puberty and continues until menopause; a natural and healthy process for girls and women of reproductive age that lasts 2 to 5 days, but this varies from individual to individual.

It is important to note that the issue of adolescent menstruation has piqued the interest of researchers, scientists, humanitarians, and other social commentators. For example, Belayneh et al. (2019) identified a lack of knowledge about menstruation and its management before menarche as the foundation of the challenges confronting adolescents during their menstrual cycle in their study of "menstruation experiences and practices among adolescents". By implication, adolescents lose confidence in opening up to others, including their

parents, as a result of the fear of bleeding, changes in the body during menstruation, and restrictions imposed on them during menstruation. However, Sundari et al. (2022) maintained in their study on "psychosocial problems of adolescent girls during menstruation" that only a subset of adolescents are affected by a lack of knowledge by drawing conclusions from rural and urban settings. "Urban and rural girls were aware of menstruation prior to reaching menarche." In urban girls, the mother was the primary source of information about menstruation, whereas in rural areas, it was the responsibility of the teacher."

Access to clean materials, lack of privacy for changing pads, disposal facilities for sanitary napkins, socio-cultural restrictions, less psychological and social support, poor knowledge about managing pain during menstruation, non-availability of counseling services, and inadequate information on menstruation and its management are other dimensions of challenges adolescents face during menstruation (Chandra-Mouli & Patel, 2020; Higuera et al., 2022). According to Chandra-Mouli and Patel (2020), adolescents also suffer from premenstrual syndrome, which is a group of symptoms that begin one to two weeks before their period and end immediately after it begins. Abdominal bloating, cramping, sore and swollen breasts, acne, constipation, diarrhea, headaches, back and muscle pain, unusual sensitivity to light or sound, and unusual clumsiness are some of the symptoms. The symptoms are severe enough for some adolescents to interfere with their daily existential activities.

Arising from the above, it is glaring that several studies have been carried out on the challenges facing adolescents in their menstruating age, but many of these studies are empirically based and some are done under the umbrella of a non-governmental organizations. It is therefore important to purposefully draw analyses from existing literatures on the challenges facing adolescents in their menstruating age by relying exclusively on literatures surrounding adolescent reproductive health. Firstly, argument of scholars surrounding the problem of hygiene among menstruating adolescent will be presented and subsequently the psychological distress experienced by menstruating adolescents will be presented and lastly conclusion will be established.

Problem of Hygiene among Menstruating Adolescents

It is not debatable that menstruation is the major landmark in female biological transition from childhood to Adulthood. It signals the beginning of reproductive abilities and is closely associated with the ongoing development of secondary sexual characteristics. This is the period when adolescents become over-sensitive and self-conscious as their physical body changes over time (Holmes et al., 2021). However, people perceive menstruation as women's belonging that must be kept hidden and private (Mohammed et al. 2020). This was further reiterated by Sachan et al. (2012) when they asserted that despite the onset of menstruation being, unique to females, deep-rooted traditions do not allow adolescent girls to realize their rights in many parts of the world. This view is consistent with McPherson et al. (2004) cited in Behera et al. (2015), that the perception of the world about menstruation has hindered them to address the topic of menstruation before menarche. Bulto, (2021) also argued that many girls are not properly prepared and a high number of girls start menstruation without any idea of what is happening to them and why.

In furtherance to the above, adolescents are forced to face fear, humiliation, and guilt during menstruation due to a lack of prior information about menstrual behaviour. Many at times, lack of accurate information among adolescents has bred unhygienic menstrual behaviour which encourages infections in the urinary and reproductive tracts, stillbirths, miscarriages, infertility difficulties, and in extreme cases cervical cancer (Bulto 2021; Asumah et al., 2022). Mohammed et al. (2020) remarked that the period of adolescence is of particular concern because; myths, taboos, and socio-cultural restrictions create barriers for adolescents to acquire accurate information about menstrual hygiene, especially in low- and middle-income settings. They further advanced that "at school, adolescent girls in low-income countries are faced with poor hygiene facilities such as; inadequate water for washing, lack of soap, poor privacy, non-functioning or unclean toilets and no disposal facilities to support the hygienic management of menstruation in the school environment". This has however encouraged ineffective menstruation hygiene behaviour among the adolescent girls.

According to Asumah et al. (2022) in their study conducted in India, it was revealed that the majority of their respondents use clothes instead of sanitary pads as absorbent materials. It must, therefore, be stated that some adolescents use and re-use these clothes repeatedly till they deem it fit to dispose them. Hennegan et al. (2016)

also observed that some girls in a Ugandan boarding school were embarrassed to wash their used clothes in public, so they cleaned and dried them in the dormitory at night. They argued that the majority of their respondents cleaned their clothes with soap and water which was in contrast to a study in Mumbai India, where most respondents washed their reusable absorbent materials with only water (Dipali et al., 2009). Meanwhile, a respondent in Asumah et al., 2022 study said she resorts to the use of tissue paper or cotton, the tissue which does not absorb enough blood but rather tear up and even get stuck in the vagina.

In another study by Behera et al. (2015), they argued that the girls preferred the use of sanitary pads during monthly periods, but many were not able to do so, because of accessibility and financial concerns. Also, the shyness of the girls to ask a male shopkeeper for sanitary pads was another important barrier to using sanitary napkins which compelled them to use cloths that they used repeatedly for a longer period of time after washing only with plain soap and water. It was also observed that some countries have very limited education in schools about menstruation and menstrual hygiene. Classroom teachers may be unwilling to discuss menstrual hygiene management, particularly male teachers, due to the taboos associated with menstruation in these settings. In some situations, the teachers themselves are uninformed about the general dynamics of menstrual behaviour.

Additionally, improper modes of disposal of sanitary pads among adolescents had been widely reported in literature which include; refuse dump/bush, gutter, burning, drains, and toilets. These disposal modes many at times is influenced by some cultural beliefs of the participants. According to Ekolo & Ikolo (2021), they claim in their study that majority of girls wrapped their used absorbent materials with plastics before disposing them. In a study done by Bulto (2021), he submitted that lack of access to appropriate sanitary protection products or facilities, and lack of WASH facilities has encouraged inappropriate modes of disposal among adolescents. At school, adolescent girls in low-income countries are faced with poor hygiene facilities such as; inadequate water for washing, lack of soap, poor privacy, non-functioning or unclean toilets, and no disposal facilities to support the hygienic management of menstruation in the school environment (Aluko et al., 2014).

In Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria, Aluko et al. (2014) argued in their own study that there was no gender-sensitive add-ins in any of the toilets within the recommended national standards. In a similar vein, findings of a study in Ethiopia revealed that over 80% of students do not change their menstrual absorbent materials in school; they prefer to do so at home mainly because of the lack of suitable water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities in the schools (Mohammed et al., 2020). Thus, the lack of safe toilets in many schools and the unhygienic use of clothes in place of sanitary pad have subjected many girls vulnerable to diseases, infections, and reproductive tracts infections. It is therefore pivotal for the government and all concerned authorities in the health milieu to educate the adolescents, teachers, and their mothers by creating awareness of the dangers of unhygienic practices among girls during menstruation, providing adolescent girls with sanitary products, and facilities to understand and manage their menstruation. Failure to address this pressing issue may spur a menace of uncontrolled reproductive diseases among adolescent girls.

Psychological Distress Experienced By Menstruating Adolescents

Menstruation is a normal physiological process occurring every month throughout the reproductive age of a girl child. It is an inevitable part of a female life and an important indicator of normal sexual and reproductive health in adolescents. At the same time, it cannot be overlooked that menstruation is accompanied by varieties of psychological distress with it attendant implication on the adolescents. Banikarim et al. (2000) in his study titled: "prevalence and impact of dysmenorrhea on Hispanic female adolescents" proved that a significantly greater proportion of participants with severe menstrual pain reported school absence, decreased test-taking skills, and limited socialization with friends and sports participation. This was further reiterated by Karmacharya et al. (2022) that dysmenorrhea can cause mental problems in adolescents resulting in their loneliness and reduced participation in different social activities.

Adolescents also encounter pre-menstrual syndrome pain which is an important discourse in adolescent menstrual behaviour. According Cao et al. (2020), premenstrual syndrome, or PMS, refers to the physical and psychological symptoms that females experience in the week or two leading up to their menstrual period. It is a physical pain or emotional stresses that are severe enough to affect their daily lives (Nnennaya et al., 2021). The physical symptoms of PMS pains are lethargy and tiredness, headache, sleeplessness, increased sleep, fullness

and tenderness of breasts, feeling of heaviness in the lower abdomen, pain and swelling in the ankle and knee joints, and swelling of face (Cao et al., 2020). Some of the emotional symptoms of PMS include tension or anxiety, depressed mood, mood swings and irritability or anger, appetite changes and food cravings, trouble falling asleep (insomnia), social withdrawal, poor concentration and change in libido (Kaur et al., 2021).

In a study done by Mohammed et al. (2020), some major distress adolescents face during the menstrual cycle was delineated which includes breast tenderness, uneasiness, weakness, occasional vomiting, head reeling, and pain in abdomen, thighs and legs. They also reported that some girls expressed eruption of pimples on their face which makes them feel worried about their look while some others reported to feel laziness, loss of appetite, weakness, depression and sometimes irritation, excessive bleeding for prolonged monthly period, absence of periods could also generate fear and two periods in a month could also generate a major psychological distress. Other studies have also reported low academic performance and truancies among adolescent due to excessive bleeding. The fact that many of these adolescents receives less psychological and social support, poor knowledge about managing pain during menses, non-availability of counseling services, and inadequate information on menstruation and its management, no preparation before menarche, cramping, burden and stigma could further increase the psychological distress they experience at their menstruating age (Aluko, 2014). It was added that the psychological issues include nervousness, poor concentration, sadness, tension, dysphoria and irritability (Kaur et al., 2021).

Ramadugu et al., (2011) also pointed out that nearly one third of the girls in their study were embarrassed by pubertal changes and felt shame, guilty, scared, shyness, and sadness during menstruation. This has bred low self-esteem and tampered with their self-confidence. According to Purnamasari et al. (2020), menstruation poses physical discomfort to women, and hampers their mental health as at the time they are on their period. They added that the girls experience frequent mood swings during the menstrual period which is well explained by hormonal fluctuations in the body. Additionally, other studies revealed that adolescents may feel sick, sad, irritable, and missed school during menstruation because they would not be able to concentrate and pay attention during school hours.

However, El Ayoubi, et al. (2021) argued that some adolescents use pills to delay their menses in order to attend marriages, religious ceremonies, festivals, examinations, and outings. Fleischer et al. (2022) also revealed that frequently taking pills to delay periods affects future menstrual cycles and overall reproductive health which can make the regular menstrual cycle go fuddled. It can also lead to heavy bleeding and serious health conditions. Hence, it can be generally inferred from the above that menstruation which is a natural biological issue can produce some psychological reactions in adolescent which has been presented sequentially in literature. Some of the psychological distress that can be extracted from the arguments presented thus far includes, low self-esteem, mental health distortion which can generate mood swing, anger, feeling depressed, low intelligence performance and feeling of isolation. It is therefore encouraged that parents and significant others should counsel and provide a supportive environment for the emerging adolescents on how the symptoms and severities that comes with menstruation can be controlled.

Conclusion

Poor and inaccurate knowledge of menstrual behavior contributes significantly to the challenges that menstruating adolescents face today. Looking through scholarly productions, this paper has been written to address some unique challenges faced by menstruating adolescents, ranging from their hygiene patterns to the psychological distress they experience before and during menstruation.

Suggestions

This paper then suggests that:

1. Governments address adolescent menstrual health, which is a significant public health issue, by organizing workshops and seminars to educate parents, teachers, adolescent girls, and the general public about the serious dangers of unhygienic menstrual practices thereby, providing enabling environments for frequent absorbent changes in schools and public places.

2. Parents and significant others counsel and provide a supportive environment for emerging adolescents on how to control the symptoms and severity of menstruation in order to reduce the psychological distress experienced as a result.

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