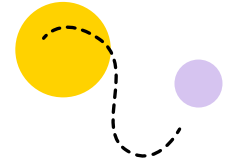


What you need to know. Period.

Supporting youth struggling with period pain

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* The *What you need to know. Period.* program is all about getting people talking. It's not a secret that some of us get a period, but there is a lot of misinformation out there about **menstruation**. Let's work together to demystify periods for everyone, not just for people who get a period.

Words you need to know. Period.

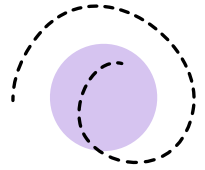
Menstruation is often called a period because it's the period of time each month when a person with a uterus bleeds. The uterus is a triangle-shaped area inside the body (below the belly button). This is where a baby can grow during pregnancy. Most periods last anywhere from 3-8 days and happen once a month.

Why is it so difficult to know whether what someone is experiencing with their period is normal or a cause for concern? Because...

- The range of what people who menstruate experience is so wide
- Period pain, even extreme period pain, is often normalized
- Many of us haven't learned about menstrual health and period-related health conditions. We don't know what's "normal" and what's "not normal."
- Research into women's health and health issues affecting people with a uterus is lacking
- We can't ever really know what another person is feeling (physically and emotionally)

How can adults support young people struggling with menstrual pain and period-related symptoms that are difficult to manage? This discussion guide is designed to help you recognize when period pain might be a cause for concern and to have important conversations about period pain with the young people in your life.

Best practices for supporting youth struggling with period pain:



Believe them

- Validate their experience by reflecting back what you're hearing. For example, "I'm sorry you're hurting. It sounds like your painful periods are keeping you from doing the things you enjoy. That's really hard."
- Empathize with their experience, whether you get a period or not. For example, "I can only imagine how uncomfortable you must be feeling. I'm sorry you're in so much pain."
- Let them know that you believe them and that you'll do what you can to help. This could sound like, "Thank you for trusting me with your experience. I can see that you're hurting. You know your body best, and if you think it's time to see a doctor, I support you."

Listen more than you speak

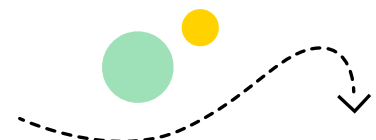
- Listen actively and resist the urge to offer advice or solutions unless they specifically ask what you think. For example, "Are you looking for advice? I'm happy just to listen if what you need is someone to hear you."
- If you're concerned about the symptoms they're sharing with you, you could ask whether they're worried and if they might like to speak with a healthcare professional, without suggesting that they seek help. See the section below about "normal" period pain for ways to recognize if period symptoms might be a sign of something more serious.

Use empowering language

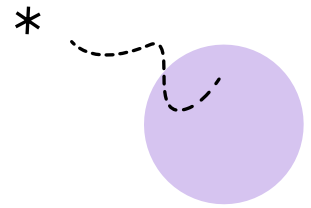
- Language is powerful. Empower youth by affirming that they know their body best and that they get to decide what happens next.
- Tell them they did a brave and smart thing by coming to speak to you about their period concerns. Encourage them to continue to advocate for their own health and get the support they need.
- Depending on your relationship with the youth and your own comfort level, if appropriate, you might offer to serve as a medical advocate. A medical advocate is someone who goes to a health appointment with someone. They could be there for emotional support, to take notes, and to ask questions.

Ask about next steps

- Ask them what they'd like to do or what they'd like to happen next. What do they need? How can you help?
- You might ask about what kinds of support they already have in place and help them identify their next steps. For example, maybe they already have a family doctor and could make an appointment to speak with them about their period symptoms.
- You might refer them to the *What you need to know. Period.* workbook or the websites below to learn more and to get answers to their questions.



Recognizing when period pain might be a cause for concern



What is “normal” period pain?

Many people who get their period will have uncomfortable physical and emotional symptoms before and during their period.

Some people will experience:

- Cramping in the area below the belly button
- Diarrhea, constipation, or nausea
- Sore breasts
- Feeling more sensitive emotionally
- Back pain
- Fatigue or tiredness
- Dizziness

Period pain is not normal if...

- Taking an over-the-counter painkiller like Advil, Tylenol, or Midol doesn't help
- The pain regularly keeps you from going to school and doing your regular activities
- You regularly vomit, have diarrhea, or are constipated during or around your period
- You regularly bleed through a pad, tampon, or period underwear in less than 2 hours

Any one of these could be cause for concern and a sign that it could be time to speak to a healthcare professional. Some physical symptoms are normal, but some could be signs of a more serious health condition, like endometriosis.

What is endometriosis?

Endometriosis (en-doh-meetree-oh-sis), sometimes called endo, is one of the most common period-related conditions. Endo affects at least 1 in 10 girls and women. It also affects transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse people, but we don't yet know exactly how many people in these groups are affected by endo.

Symptoms can be very painful, difficult, and can affect a person's quality of life by making it hard for them to go to school or work, to be social, active, and to enjoy their hobbies. Endo is a life-altering condition. It's much worse and more serious than having a bad period.

Endometriosis (endo) is a **chronic condition** where tissue that's like the lining of the uterus (the endometrium) attaches to other parts of the body. Usually found in the pelvis (the area below the belly button), it can happen outside of the uterus in other parts of the body too. Like the process of a period, the endometriosis tissue can become inflamed (irritated) by hormones. Endometriosis can be very painful, and it can also create scarring inside the body, which may affect how a person's body functions.

Words you need to know. Period.



A **chronic condition** is a health problem that lasts longer than 6 months and may become worse over time.

Can I catch endometriosis?

Endometriosis can start around the time a person gets their first period. It isn't something you catch, like a cold, but it can run in the family. A menstruating person who has a close relative with endo is more likely to have it.

Delay to diagnosis

Many people with endo experience a delay to diagnosis. This means that when they first speak to a doctor about their symptoms, the doctor might not think that they have endo. Because many of us are told that period pain is normal, some people with extreme pain, like endo pain, might not recognize that what they're experiencing is not normal. They might not try to get medical help. Getting a diagnosis can lead to getting help.

Endometriosis pain & symptom management

While it can't be cured, there are treatments to help manage endo pain. The sooner endo is diagnosed the better. Endo is typically treated with a combination of:

- **Minimally invasive surgery** - A less painful and easier to recover from procedure. Surgeons use a camera and tiny instruments to look for and cut out endo.
- **Medications** - Including those that affect the body's hormones and control or stop the menstrual cycle, like hormonal contraception ("the birth control pill").
- **Other forms of care and lifestyle changes** - Including healthy eating, pelvic physiotherapy, yoga and meditation, acupuncture, and good mental health support.

If you think something's wrong, don't keep it to yourself

Some of the symptoms of endo can be embarrassing or difficult to talk about, but there's nothing to be ashamed of. Encourage the young people in your life to advocate for their menstrual health needs and ask for help. Endo can be treated, but not cured. The earlier the diagnosis the better.



This discussion guide focuses on ways to support young people struggling with difficult period symptoms. For more information about menstruation, including activities and ways to continue your learning, check out our additional resources, including:

- The *What you need to know. Period.* workbook - available online and in PDF format
- What to do if you're worried about your period pain - a bite-sized lesson plan
- Endometriosis: More than just a bad period - a bite-sized lesson plan
- The Endometriosis Network Canada: endometriosisnetwork.com - More information about what endometriosis is, treatments, and other helpful resources.