

## Knowledge of Adolescent Girls Regarding Menstruation in Tribal Areas of Meghalaya

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**ABSTRACT** The present investigation was aimed at studying the awareness levels of menstruation and related aspects among adolescent girls. The study was conducted in Rongram block of West Garo Hills district of Meghalaya with 100 adolescent school going girls in the age group of 13 to 18 years. The respondents were selected randomly from secondary schools of five villages. A pre-tested and modified self-structured interview schedule was formulated and information on the knowledge related to menstrual aspects was collected. The results revealed that most of the girls were in the age group of 16 to 18 years and studying in tenth standard. The mean age at menarche was found to be 12.67 years. It was indicated from the results that the respondents had an average level of awareness of menstrual aspects. Girls did not know about the meaning of menstruation and associated it with bad/unclean blood. Girls were aware about different problems associated with periods, out of which pain in lower abdomen and backache were the common responses. Knowledge of hygienic practices during these times was found to be good. A significant association was found between menstrual awareness and ordinal position of the respondents. Age of the respondents and total family income seemed to have good correlation with their awareness regarding menstruation and related aspects.

### INTRODUCTION

Adolescents form a sizeable proportion of the population and an important resource of any country. According to WHO (1977) adolescent group comprises of people between the ages of 10 to 19 years. The main physical changes during this period include the adolescent's growth spurt, gonadal growth, growth of secondary sexual organs and characteristics, changes in body composition and growth of respiratory, circulatory and muscular systems. The onset of adolescence is usually associated with the commencement of puberty and the appearance of secondary sex characteristics. It is also a formative stage in terms of sexual and reproductive maturity which influences one's reproductive health and well-being throughout life.

During the whole period of adolescence, menarche is the most important event in the life of an adolescent girl. Menarche is the first menstrual period generally occurring between the

ages of 12 to 15 years and is an important milestone of puberty for most women. Menarche marks the beginning of a multitude of physical, physiological and psychological changes in the lives of the adolescent girls. Although the menarche is but one part of the maturation process, it is often, culturally defined as the indicator of girl's maturity and readiness for marriage and sexual activity. Studies by Mensh et al. (1998) reveal that at the onset of menstruation, girls' lives change abruptly and in some domains, their activity maybe restricted and may be kept from food preparation and consumption, socializing, religious practice, mobility, etc. Menstruation is also considered taboo and often enough information is not provided to the girls. This results in girls having little or no knowledge about the aspects of menstruation which may result in different types of morbidity in women. A study by Ahuja and Tiwari (1995) revealed that about three-fourth of the girls were unaware of the physiology of menstruation and experienced isolation during their periods. Research by Jyothi and Chandralekha (2000) revealed that knowledge of the process of menstruation existed in only a quarter of menarcheal girls, although majority of them were studying in tenth standards and the study stressed on the need to provide first hand information about menarche in order to be

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mentally prepared to face it. A recent study by Swarnalatha and Vasantha (2007) on attitudes, knowledge and beliefs of adolescent girls on reproductive health revealed poor knowledge of reproductive health and its related aspects. A study by Gupta and Sinha (2006) on awareness about reproduction and adolescent change in school girls found out that majority of girls have only partial or incomplete knowledge of facts on menarche and on physical changes. A study by Mahajan and Sharma (2004) revealed that the overall knowledge about menarche was poor among the rural as well as urban adolescent girls.

In spite of the changing social and cultural norms and practices in the society, the girls and women especially in the tribal setting have less access to health care facilities. Thus information is often limited, wrong and confusing which makes the adolescents especially young girls to have incorrect notions and ideas which may lead to unsafe health practices. Against this background, the present study was undertaken to examine the awareness levels of adolescent girls on the aspects of menstruation.

### METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in the Rongram block of West Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. A total sample of 100 adolescent school-going girls of age 13 to 18 years were selected randomly. Five villages from the block were selected randomly and 20 girls from each government school located in these villages were taken for the study. The data was collected with the help of self structured interview schedule which consisted of general information on the socio-economic background and specific questions pertaining to awareness regarding menstruation and related aspects. In depth interviews were conducted with the respondents in their schools with the prior permission from the principals. The data was analyzed for various aspects in terms of frequencies, percentages and means. Further analysis was done through correlation and chi-square tests.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The socio-economic background of the respondents have been depicted in table 1. It can be seen that majority of the girls (41%) were in the age group of 16 to 17 years while the mean age was found to be 16.65 years. Most of the

girls (36%) were studying in class tenth and almost an equal percentage in classes eighth and ninth. Majority of the girls (30%) were having ordinal position of four and above which means that the families of the respondents were large and having many children. Most of the parents were educated till high school level, had medium-sized families, having five to eight members and having a total income of Rs.2001 to Rs.4000/- (33%) in most of the cases.

Menarche is an important milestone in the life of a girl as this signifies the fertility of a woman. It was observed in the present study that majority of the respondents (57%) were aware that menarche occurred between 11 to 12 years while the rest thought it to be between 13 to 14 years. If we look at the educational background of the girls, majority of them were studying in tenth standard but the girls did not know what menstruation meant. Many of them (42%) agreed that

**Table 1: Socio-economic background of respondents.**

<i>S.No. Variables</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>1. Age of Respondents (in years)</i>	
12 – 13	4.0
14 – 15	20.0
16 – 17	41.0
Above 17	35.0
Mean age	16.65 (1.65)
<i>2. Education</i>	
8 <sup>th</sup> standard	31.0
9 <sup>th</sup> standard	33.0
10 <sup>th</sup> standard	36.0
<i>3. Ordinal Position</i>	
1	27.0
2	22.0
3	20.0
4 and above	30.0
<i>4. Educational Background of Mothers</i>	
Illiterate	16.0
Primary level	21.0
Middle level	30.0
High school level	33.0
<i>5. Educational Background of Fathers</i>	
Illiterate	8.0
Primary level	17.0
Middle level	31.0
High school level	39.0
Higher secondary level	5.0
<i>6. Size of Family</i>	
Small (1 – 4 members)	19.0
Medium (5 – 8 members)	71.0
Large (above 8 members)	10.0
<i>7. Total Monthly Income of Family</i>	
Rs.900 – Rs.2000/-	6.0
Rs.2001 – Rs.4000/-	33.0
Rs.4001 – Rs.6000/-	26.0
Rs.6001 – Rs.8000/-	25.0
Above Rs.8000/-	7.0

menstruation is unclean/dirty/bad blood while the rest thought it as a monthly process (Table 2). The findings are in concurrence with that of Reddy et al. (2005) who found that knowledge of the process of menstruation existed in only a quarter of menarcheal girls although majority of them were studying in tenth standard. A study by Kamalam and Rajalakshmi (2005) also found that majority of girls had no to knowledge of menstruation, its onset, the reasons for irregular periods and what to do for discomfort during periods.

A recent study by Sharma et al. (2008) explained that though menstrual cycle is a normal monthly function of a healthy female body but the main concerns are delayed menstruation, irregular cycles pertaining to hormonal fluctuations and pain during menses. Table 3 gives the details of various problems of girls during menstruation and it is evident that awareness about pain in lower abdomen (97%) and backache (89%) were found to be highest followed by weakness/tiredness (82%), bodyache (55%), pain in thighs/legs (44%), and headache (31%).

Hygiene is an important aspect especially during menstruation. Proper understanding of menarche and personal hygiene during menstruation significantly influences the reproductive health of adolescents. It is found that the respondents had good awareness regarding hygienic aspects of menstruation (Table 4). Most of the

respondents (67%) considered having bath twice a day and also thought that readymade sanitary napkins should be used. Majority of the girls (76%) thought that it was necessary to change the napkins more than twice a day. It is clear from Figure 1 that friends (50%) were the main contributors for getting the knowledge about menarche followed by mothers (36%) and aunts / relatives (19%). A study by Singh (2006) on the perceptions and experiences of women regarding menstruation revealed that friends or other female relatives were the first people to tell the girls about menstruation and knowledge about menstruation was lacking. A study by Reddy et al. (2005) revealed that only one in seven of the adolescent girls had knowledge of menses prior to its onset.

**Table 4: Knowledge of hygiene maintained during menstrual periods.**

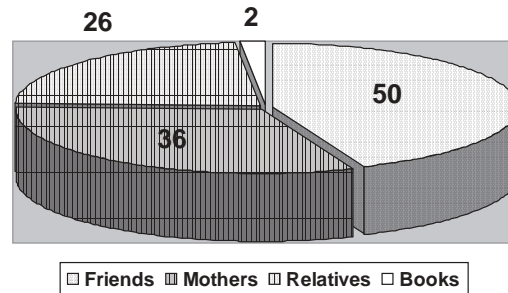
S. No.	Particulars	Percentage
1	<i>Bath During Periods</i>	
	Once in a day	3.0
	Twice a day	67.0
2	<i>Sanitary Napkins to be Used</i>	
	Home made pads	32.0
	Readymade sanitary napkins	68.0
3	<i>Frequently of Changing Napkins</i>	
	Once in a day	2.0
	Twice a day	28.0
4	<i>More than 2 times a day.</i>	70.0
	Re-usage of cloth pads	36.0

**Table 2: Awareness of age at menarche and understanding of menstruation.**

S. No.	Particulars	Total percentage
1.	<i>Awareness of age at menarche</i>	
	11 – 12 years	57.0
	13 – 14 years	42.0
2.	<i>Above 14 years</i>	1.0
	<i>Understanding of menstruation</i>	
	No knowledge	28.0
	Dirty/bad/unclean blood	42.0
	A monthly process /	30.0
	Blood which flow from adolescent girls.	

**Table 3: Perception of girls regarding different health problems associated during periods.**

Problems	Percentage
Pain in lower abdomen	97.0
Backache	89.0
Weakness/tiredness	82.0
Bodyache	55.0
Pain in thighs/ legs	44.0
Headache	31.0



**Fig. 1. Percentage distribution of girls related to awareness of source of information about menarche**

The respondents were categorized on the basis of responses pertaining to their awareness regarding menstruation and its related aspects. It can be observed from the Table 5 that majority of the respondents (72%) had scores in average range which means that they had adequate knowledge while the chi – square analysis revealed

**Table 5: Association of ordinal position and awareness regarding menstruation.**

Scores	Ordinal position			Total	Chi square value
	1-2	2-3	Above 4		
Below 20	6	6	5	17	117.42**
21 – 26	37	23	12	72	
Above 26	5	5	1	11	
Total	48	34	18	100	

Note: \*\*denotes one percent level of significance

a significant association between awareness of menstruation and the ordinal position of the respondents. This means that respondents who were having greater position in the families were having more knowledge than the younger girls. Also menstrual awareness seemed to be having a good correlation with the age and family income of the respondents (as revealed in Table 6). This means more the age of the respondents and income of the families, better is the knowledge. A study by Gupta and Sinha (2006) focused on the influence of socio-economic factor on level of awareness of reproductive health of school girls. Results revealed that factors like income significantly influenced source of information and awareness levels of different aspects of reproductive health.

**Table 6: Correlation between age and income of respondents with menstrual awareness.**

Variables	Menstrual awareness
Age of respondents	0.2166
Family income	0.3028

Adolescent girls, constituting nearly one-tenth of the population forms an extremely important segment of our society. These girls need special care in view of their role in shaping the health and well-being of the present as well as future generations. On an average most adolescent girls in the country have little knowledge of menstruation. Menstruation may be viewed either positively or negatively. For instance, menstruation may be perceived as a sign of femininity, fertility, youth or purification of the body, yet at the same time it is also linked with vulnerability and pollution and with attitudes

of disgust with shame. In some parts of India these negative perceptions are the basis for restricting women's religious and social traditions or taboos that menstruation may be looked on as more than just a physiological process (WHO 1999). Thus awareness among girls on issues related to sexual and reproductive health through proper population education/sex education need to be created and for this, emphasis may be given on various mass media/information, education and communication programmes.

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