

A photograph of three women sitting at a wooden table in a cafe, laughing and looking at a smartphone. The woman in the center has curly hair and glasses. There are coffee cups and pastries on the table. The background is a blurred cafe interior.

*Wear  
white  
again.*  
CO.UK

# *Talking Heavy Periods*

TACKLING THE TABOO:

A guide to talking all things periods and heavy periods



# Foreword from Dr Dawn Harper

Do you ever talk about your period? Maybe you don't want to? Maybe you feel embarrassed or struggle to find the words or the right moment? Maybe you've never thought about it?

In this guide we explore some of the words and phrases we feel most comfortable using to describe periods and look at the questions we should be asking ourselves and our loved ones about periods, so that we can all be aware of what's "normal" and when in fact someone might need to seek help.



Despite affecting more than 1 in 5 women in the UK,<sup>1</sup> we know that over half of women living with heavy periods never speak to their GP about it.<sup>2</sup> Heavy periods can have a huge impact on physical and emotional wellbeing and on quality of life, yet they are a treatable medical condition.

I've been working with *Wear White Again* on this guide, to encourage women and men to speak openly and without embarrassment about heavy periods.

Those of you who are suffering with heavy periods will also find ideas on how to talk about your symptoms with your GP, practice nurse and other healthcare professionals. Being able to describe your experiences accurately and in detail (no matter how uncomfortable you feel doing so) can help them more easily diagnose and help you.

There are lots of treatment options out there for heavy periods – it's not just hysterectomy or nothing!<sup>3</sup> I see hundreds of women with period problems, so please, don't be embarrassed - as doctors we're not! We see it all and hear it all, so please come and talk to us and get the help you need.



*Dr Dawn Harper*





# Still a taboo?

From being worried about bleeding through clothes, to significant pain and changing tampons every hour, heavy periods are an important and unaddressed health issue that can massively impact people's lives.

On average, women will have 480 periods between the ages of 12 and 52,<sup>4</sup> and in the UK, almost 3.5 million women<sup>2,4,5</sup> suffer with heavy periods. Yet as a nation, we still seem to feel uncomfortable talking about them. The *Talking Heavy Periods* research undertaken for this guide revealed...

31%

of people said they would feel uncomfortable talking about periods in general (44% men and 18% women)<sup>6</sup>

24%

of women think their partner would be uncomfortable if they were to discuss their periods with them<sup>6</sup>

11%

of people never speak to their partner about their periods<sup>6</sup>

1 in 10

Nearly 1 in 10 women don't even feel comfortable speaking to their girlfriends about periods<sup>6</sup>

Despite roughly half of the world's population having one each month, why are periods still a taboo?<sup>7</sup> Whether it be around the dinner table, in the office or at school – **most people still avoid talking about their "time of the month."**

"As a dad of daughters, I'd hate to think my kids wouldn't come to me or my wife if they were having issues with heavy periods. Should be no stigma."

- @dadbloguk



# Talking heavy periods

The *Talking Heavy Periods* research found that people used over 250 different terms to describe periods! From “paging Edward Cullen” - to “Liverpool are playing at home” - it seems that some people will go to great lengths to avoid the “P word”<sup>6</sup>

## What to say

When it comes down to it, the research showed that the phrases we all feel most comfortable with are, in fact, the most straightforward:

“having a period”

“time of the month”

“menstruating”<sup>6</sup>

Some of the women from our research felt that using the correct terminology was not only less confusing, but avoiding the word “period” actually perpetuates the taboo which surrounds them.

## What not to say

Unsurprisingly, women were pretty unified about the terms they didn’t like. The top three least popular terms were “red wedding” followed by “paging Edward Cullen” and also “shark week”<sup>6</sup>

## Words to avoid

On the rag

On the blob

Shark week

Lady time

Aunt Flo

Monthly friend

Having the painters in

Girl flu

Red Wedding

Paging Edward Cullen

Crimson tide

Code red

“I tend to stick with periods. I think all the nicknames make it seem as if we should not really talk about periods, so just reinforces the taboo surrounding them.”

@rootsandwings1



# 10 funny and cringeworthy expressions to describe periods

Tomato soup

Devil's waterfall

Dracula's lunch

The cardinal has his hat on

Red badge of courage

Checking into the red roof inn

Red wedding

Arsenal / Liverpool playing at home

Cup of joy is overflowing

Painting the town red

## And finally, is it ever ok to ask... "Have you got your period?"

Well, yes and no! 46% of men compared to 58% of women think it is never ok to ask if a woman is on her period. However, perhaps it's all about the context. If the question comes from a concerned friend, partner or family member then some women felt that the question was appropriate.<sup>6</sup>

"Normally the people who ask that question are the ones to blame for my mood not the period 😊"

@Thrumyrearview





"It has to start with women being made to feel at ease. I found chatting to girlfriends on a fun night out always breaks the ice and makes it easier to share any worries"

@thesoupdragon44

# 6

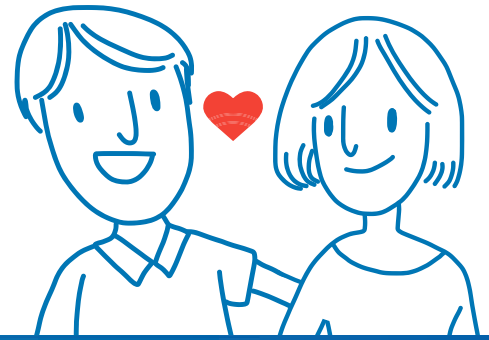
*things about periods we should all be talking about*



- ✓ How often do you get your period?
- ✓ How long does it last?
- ✓ How often do you have to change your pads / tampons?
- ✓ How painful is it?
- ✓ Do you experience bleeding between periods or after sex?
- ✓ Are you suffering from symptoms such as tiredness, lack of energy or shortness of breath?

# 4

## *things men should talk about with their partners*



- ✓ Do you think your periods are a bigger issue/heavier than they should be?
- ✓ Would it help if you made notes to keep track of your periods?
- ✓ How can I help?
- ✓ Do you think it would help to speak to your doctor?

"It is very important to talk, especially to us men about things like this as we never really understand what the lady is going through. You should never feel embarrassed especially around your partner as talking will help us understand more."

- @Dad2Two\_







# About heavy periods. What's normal and what's not?

## Normal bleeding



Having to change your pad or tampon every 4-5 hours



A menstrual cycle of approx. 21-35 days



A period lasting 4-7 days



Use of a single tampon or pad is sufficient



Changing a moon cup more regularly than every 4 hours

## Heavy bleeding



Changing your pad or tampon more frequently than every 1-2 hours



A menstrual cycle of less than 21 days



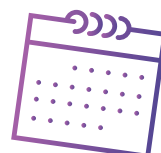
A period lasting longer than 7 days



Doubling up on protection needed

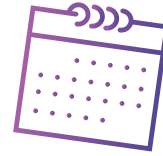
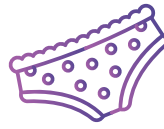


Changing a moon cup more regularly than every 4 hours





# Period confusion



You may have heard that when you are on your period you can't have a bath, go swimming or have sex; that if you use tampons you can't be a virgin or that when you're stressed you get your period. Some people even think that you can't go camping while on your period as the bears will smell it and attack!

Period myths have existed for thousands of years - the ancient Greeks, believed that the uterus wanders and roams around the body, causing women to suffocate.<sup>8</sup>

A quarter of women in the UK who are aged between 16-39 don't understand their menstrual cycle.<sup>9</sup> The *Talking Heavy Periods* research found that...

ALMOST  
**35%**

of men and over 20% of women do not know where in the body period blood comes from, with some thinking it comes from the bladder!<sup>6</sup>

**10%**

of men don't know how often the average woman has a period<sup>6</sup>

It seems heavy periods are even more of a mystery. Whilst women are more aware of the causes than men, only 55% of women knew that endometriosis – one of the most common causes – can result in heavy periods.<sup>6</sup>

The taboo around periods and heavy periods and the subsequent confusion have been shown to endanger women's health, with the lack of conversation making it difficult for women to understand what is healthy and when to ask for help.<sup>10</sup>

Supportive and educated partners, families and fathers will also create an environment where women feel comfortable to talk about their periods **without the fear of being told "it's just part of being a woman."**



# Talking heavy periods with your GP

Nearly a quarter (22%) of women with heavy periods say they would be uncomfortable discussing periods with a GP, which could mean that these women are potentially missing out on getting help.<sup>6</sup>

If we get into the nitty gritty of periods and heavy periods, there are some aspects we'd rather not talk about. **62% of people** don't like to talk about odour, **48% clotting**, **47% colour**, **40% flow**, and **24%** are uncomfortable talking about pain.<sup>6</sup>

Ironically these are all symptoms women should be talking about, especially with their GP, as they help identify anything unusual or troubling. And for men, asking questions and talking about specific symptoms will also help women identify when her periods aren't "normal" and when she might need to speak to a doctor.

It's important to give as much information as you can to your healthcare professional (HCP) to help get the best diagnosis and also to demonstrate how much of an impact your heavy periods are having on your everyday life. Try completing the period diary on [wearwhiteagain.co.uk](https://wearwhiteagain.co.uk) to help track your periods and symptoms. Here are a few areas you should be talking about:

- ① **Your cycle:** how often do you have a period? How long does it last? Is it regular?
- ② **How heavy is your flow:** how often are you changing towels / tampons? How many towels / tampons are you getting through per cycle? Are you doubling up on protection (i.e. using towels and tampons, or more than one of each)? How often do you bleed onto bedsheets or through clothes? Do you have to sleep on a towel?
- ③ **Clotting:** do you get clots in your periods? How often? How big are they (i.e. as big as a 10p coin, 5p coin etc.)?
- ④ **Pain:** how often do you experience pain during your cycle? How bad is the pain (use the helpful pain scale in the period diary to measure this)?
- ⑤ **Impact on quality of life:** how do your periods affect your everyday life? Have you missed out on events or activities when you have your period? Does it affect your relationships and family life? How often do you leak through your clothes? Have you had to take time off work? Do you experience feelings of tiredness and lack of energy?







## 4 tips to prepare for your GP appointment

1

**Which GP?:** you should try to keep to the same GP during the process, so it's a good idea to start with one you're comfortable with. It's also worth asking the practice receptionist if there is a specialist in women's health within the practice – remember receptionists are bound by the same codes of confidentiality as clinical staff. If there is a wait to see this GP, then you can use this time to continue to track your periods (see below).

2

**Plan ahead:** you may prefer to plan your visit for a date when you don't have your period, however it's fine to go ahead either way, as long as you are comfortable. Have a list of questions ready beforehand and take as much information as possible. The questionnaire and period diary on [wearwhiteagain.co.uk](https://www.wearwhiteagain.co.uk) can help with this - complete 2–3 months' worth of answers to help your doctor see any trends or patterns and understand the impact that your period is having on your life. If your period is causing you pain and distress, do seek help immediately.

3

**Allow enough time:** it's best to make an appointment specifically to discuss your heavy periods. If you have other health issues to discuss, consider making a double appointment.

4

**Be persistent:** if you don't get the help you feel you need or if treatments aren't working, go back to your GP and ask again. Make sure you continue to keep your period diary and take this along to any follow-up appointments.

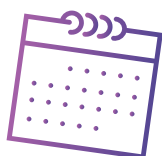


# Treatment options overview

There are a breadth of treatment options available for women living with heavy periods – it's not hysterectomy or nothing! Any treatment for heavy menstrual bleeding should first be discussed with a doctor. Depending on each individual case, there may be several treatment options available including:<sup>3</sup>

- ✓ non-hormonal medication
- ✓ hormonal medication
- ✓ intrauterine system (IUS)
- ✓ endometrial ablation
- ✓ uterine artery embolisation (UAE)
- ✓ myomectomy
- ✓ hysterectomy

Learn more about the many treatment options available at [www.wearwhiteagain.co.uk/treating-heavy-periods](http://www.wearwhiteagain.co.uk/treating-heavy-periods)





If you are suffering with heavy periods we hope this guide has inspired you to seek out further information and ask for help.

Periods and heavy periods are nothing to be embarrassed about. The more we can talk about periods, the less of a taboo they'll be, the more we'll know and understand and the easier it will be for women to know when - and how - to ask for help.

Information from this guide was gathered from research amongst 2,003 men and women and a *Wear White Again* Twitter party with BritMums. Thank you to all the fantastic people who contributed.



## References

<sup>1</sup> National Heavy Menstrual Bleeding Audit, 2011. Available at: [https://www.rcog.org.uk/globalassets/documents/guidelines/research-audit/nationalhmbaudit\\_1stannualreport\\_may2011.pdf](https://www.rcog.org.uk/globalassets/documents/guidelines/research-audit/nationalhmbaudit_1stannualreport_may2011.pdf) Last accessed July 2018

<sup>2</sup> Opinium Research carried out an online survey from 28th July to 3rd August 2017 of 1002 women aged 18+ who currently experience menorrhagia / heavy periods or have previously experienced them within the last 3 years

<sup>3</sup> Heavy Periods: Treatment. NHS Choices. Available at <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/heavy-periods/treatment/> Last accessed July 2018

<sup>4</sup> NHS Choices: Periods (2016) Available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/periods/fertility-in-the-menstrual-cycle/> Last accessed July 2018

<sup>5</sup> Based on women aged 14-60, Office for National Statistics: Population Estimates for UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, Mid 2016, datasets. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/populationestimatesforukenglandandwalesScotlandandNorthernIreland> Last accessed July 2018

<sup>6</sup> Opinium Research carried out an online survey from 25th May to 4th June 2018 of 2003 online interviews with UK adults on the language they feel comfortable using when talking about periods

<sup>7</sup> The World Bank; female population. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL.FE.ZS> Last accessed July 2018

<sup>8</sup> Hysteria Beyond Freud p26, p51. By Sander L. Gilman, Helen King, Roy Porter, G.S Rousseau, Elaine Showalter. Available at: [https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=LdxmV5J0pKc&lpg=PP1&dq=Freud&pg=PA3&redir\\_esc=y&hl=en#v=onepage&q=womb&f=false](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=LdxmV5J0pKc&lpg=PP1&dq=Freud&pg=PA3&redir_esc=y&hl=en#v=onepage&q=womb&f=false) Last accessed July 2018

<sup>9</sup> Phillips, A. (2017) '1 in 4 UK women don't understand their menstrual cycle'. ActionAid, 23rd May 2017. Available at: <https://www.actionaid.org.uk/blog/news/2017/05/24/1-in-4-uk-women-dont-understand-their-menstrual-cycle>. Last accessed July 2018

<sup>10</sup> Marni Sommer et al. (2017) Beyond menstrual hygiene: addressing vaginal bleeding throughout the life course in low and middle-income countries. *BMJ Global Health* 2:e000405.