

◆ Accessing period products

Managing your period might feel like just one more thing to have to stress about right now, at a time when many people's anxiety levels are higher and everything is feeling so different. Trying to maintain social distancing and keeping shopping trips to a minimum, money worries, or a reluctance to involve other members of your household may all impact your ability to get the products you would normally use. To avoid the shops and reduce contact with others, consider buying your period products online or asking a friend to collect some for you. You may also find yourself unable to access free sanitary products at school or college due to the lockdown; some local foodbanks may have period products available, such as Ely Foodbank (contactable on 01353 468626). If you can't access a foodbank, you can try contacting your local Mutual Aid group, or the County Council Coronavirus Hub.

Reusable period products are great news for the environment and your wallet as waste is drastically reduced, and they tend to work out cheaper over time. Sustainable, reusable products are also ideal if you are struggling to access disposable products as once you have them, you don't need to go out to buy more.

Menstrual cups: small silicone or rubber containers inserted into the vagina; they catch the blood, and then you take it out and empty the blood into the toilet. Readily available in supermarkets, pharmacies and online. They come in different shapes and sizes so a bit of research can go a long way.

Reusable pads: fit into your underwear like disposables, but can be taken out, washed, then re-used. You can buy these in some shops, but they are more available online.

Period Pants: innovative new form of leak-proof underwear that absorbs period blood; rinse in cold water after use then put in the washing machine. Prices range from £17 for 3 pairs to £45 for 1 pair.

Free bleeding: Some people might not be able to get hold of period products at the moment, but don't panic! There are other options such as; folding a piece of clean cloth in your underwear, wearing some old clothes you don't mind getting blood on, sitting on a towel or sitting in the bath. Whatever you choose to use, make sure it is clean. You should swap out to clean material about every 3-6 hours and wash anything you use thoroughly with detergent before using it again. If you get any period blood where others are likely to touch it, clean it up as soon as possible with some soap and cold water. This is important because some viruses can be transmitted to someone else through blood, but only if you already have the infection.

◆ Managing the physical symptoms

You may be able to manage painful periods yourself with hot water bottles, a TENS machine, or sexual activity (endorphins released by orgasm can help to relieve cramps). However, some people may require medication such as paracetamol, prescription medicines, or forms of contraception that may help with periods, such as the combined pill, patch, or vaginal ring.

Painkillers are in short supply at many supermarkets at the minute due to the pandemic; at the time of writing, they can be bought online; but please make sure you shop somewhere reputable such as Boots or Superdrug. Leaving the house to collect medication is one of the government's approved reasons for leaving home during the lockdown, so you can collect painkillers, and any prescription medication as normal, such as contraceptives or drugs to manage conditions such as endometriosis, anxiety or depression. Remember, your GP is still available during the pandemic, usually via telephone support. So if you're struggling to cope with your symptoms, have problems with your medication, or have concerns relating to your reproductive or sexual health, do call your surgery - you are not alone!

◆ Emotions and mood

If you're one of the estimated 75% of women or people with vulvas who experience symptoms of PMS (pre-menstrual syndrome), you might find yourself struggling with your emotions and mental health even more than usual at this time. PMS can cause mood swings, irritability, anxiety and trouble sleeping. With the stress of a global health crisis and being locked-down at home, it's easy to see how periods and hormonal fluctuations right now might be the cause of stress and depression. So what can we do to help ourselves?

Periods Information & Tips during COVID-19 (cont)

Tracking: after a few cycles of tracking your period and the symptoms you're experiencing, you will understand your body's patterns a little better and this will enable you to plan and prepare for PMS symptoms. You can use just pen and paper, or there are lots of different apps you can use such as 'Clue' <https://helloclue.com/> or 'Flo' <https://flo.health/>

Diet: try to stay hydrated and eat plenty of iron-rich foods such as red meat and green veg to help replace some of the iron lost through blood. Too much sugar can send your mood up and down, and excess alcohol can have a negative impact on our longer-term mental health.

Sleep: fluctuating hormones and heavy or painful periods can disrupt sleep too; this might be compounded by anxiety and disruption caused by the pandemic. Try to reduce screen time before bed, allow time to wind down, and consider a cut-off time for checking news or social media each evening.

Exercise can give us a boost of endorphins and during your period, the increased blood flow around your pelvis can also help with cramps. In lockdown, it may be more difficult to access the types of exercise you did before, particularly if you enjoyed the social aspect of exercise at a class or the gym. Working out with the people you live with can get everyone laughing together, and there has been a huge online response from fitness instructors, with many classes now streaming on platforms such as Zoom and on morning TV. You can exercise outside; as long as you're maintaining social distancing and time in the fresh air can help you with feelings of stress, and give you some time away from home or the people you live with.

Talking to people about our mood and emotions can make a huge difference; whether it's moaning to your mates on the group chat about your heavy periods or explaining how you feel to the people you live with. People will understand if you're not on top form, and you may find that more people are comfortable talking about periods and mental health than you think. Many other women or people with vulvas may be experiencing similar concerns and would value the opportunity to talk to a friend about it.

Medical help: If you feel like you've tried everything else and you are really struggling, it might be worth contacting your GP who can prescribe medication to regulate your menstrual cycle, or to a mental health charity or hotline who can help you access support groups and counselling.

Be kind to yourself: most people are feeling stressed and anxious right now. If you can, draw on your support network of family and friends, and make the most of help available online. For some, getting your period during the pandemic might be no big deal; for others, a source of stress, discomfort and emotional upheaval that might seem overwhelming on top of what's going on in the world. Remember that you're not alone: keep well and stay safe, and contact us here at Diverse if there is any aspect of sexual health that you would like to have a chat about.

Support and information:

Diverse: <https://www.diverse.org.uk> or enquiries@diverse.org.uk or **01223 508805**

FPA Sexual Health: <https://www.fpa.org.uk/>

Brook: <https://www.brook.org.uk/>

Cambridgeshire County Council: for COVID 19 Information and COVID-19 support group:
<https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/>

NHS: search 'Period Problems' <https://www.nhs.uk/>