

Health Promotion / Wellness / Psychosocial

Menstruation and Menstrual Health in the Workplace

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What is menstruation, and is it an occupational concern?

Menstruation is a natural biological process in which the uterus sheds its lining, resulting in monthly bleeding. This process occurs in people with uteruses as part of the reproductive cycle. Despite being a normal function, menstruation is often stigmatized, leading to significant challenges in various aspects of life, including education, healthcare, and employment.

Menstruation is an occupational concern as it affects the experiences of workers in terms of health, equity, and productivity. Historically, workplaces have not addressed menstrual health, treating it as a personal or hygiene issue rather than a workplace or human rights matter. However, menstrual health is now increasingly recognized as an occupational concern because of the physical and psychological impacts it has on workers as well as workplace productivity and inclusivity.

Menstrual health conditions such as dysmenorrhea (painful periods) and menorrhagia (heavy bleeding) can cause significant discomfort and distraction, which can affect work performance and attendance. Menstruating individuals can experience pain or other symptoms that could hinder their ability to work effectively; however, fear of stigma or professional impacts often discourages workers from disclosing menstrual-related absences.

Other signs and symptoms may include:

- Abdominal cramps
- Bloating and water retention

- Breast tenderness or swelling
- Headaches or migraines
- Lower back pain
- Fatigue or low-energy
- Acne breakouts
- Gastrointestinal issues
- Joint or muscle pain
- Mood swings, irritability, or increased sensitivity
- Anxiety, stress, or depression
- Trouble sleeping
- Food cravings or changes in appetite
- Difficulty concentrating

Not everyone experiences all of these symptoms, and it can vary from person to person, day to day, and month to month. However, it is important to recognize that menstruation has a wide range of physical and emotional effects that may impact a person's ability to work effectively.

For related information, see [Menopause in the Workplace](#).

Should menstrual issues be formally accommodated?

While everyone's "normal" is different, there may be situations when menstrual-related disorders and diseases require medical leave or accommodation. Medical conditions may include endometriosis, pelvic inflammatory disease, polycystic ovary syndrome, primary ovarian insufficiency, thyroid or pituitary gland disorders, or some forms of cancer (e.g., ovarian, uterine), among others. This list is not complete.

An accommodation is a modification to rules, policies, practices, or tasks to ensure that a person can fully participate in the work place without discrimination. Human rights legislation specifies that employers have a "duty to accommodate" a worker's needs in relation to a disability (either mental or physical). Each situation is unique, and any accommodation would need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

For related information, see [Human Rights in the Workplace](#) and [Return to Work - Accommodation](#).

How can an organization help address issues associated with menstruation?

Employers and workers should work together to respectfully address concerns about menstruation. Recognizing menstruation as a natural event and a legitimate occupational concern can lead to more inclusive, supportive, and productive work environments. Employers can play a key role by reducing the stigma around menstruation, implementing menstrual-friendly policies, and ensuring access to necessary products.

Organizations can:

- Spread awareness to break the stigma in the workplace. Silence around menstruation comes from deep-rooted taboos and gender inequality.
- Create an environment where menstruation is not a source of embarrassment or discrimination.
- Foster a psychologically healthy and safe workplace with an inclusive culture to normalize menstruation in the workplace and create a climate for open conversations and sharing successes.
- Provide information and support to all workers experiencing menstrual health conditions.
- Provide “menstrual flexibility,” which offers arrangements to help workers manage their health without feeling penalized or embarrassed. Examples may be offering remote work or alternative duties at that time (e.g., reading computer screens can be difficult when experiencing a migraine). Note that while some countries offer menstrual leave for severe menstrual symptoms, it is debated whether these leaves reinforce gendered stereotypes; therefore, a flexible approach is preferred.
- Train and support managers to understand the differences in menstruation experiences and menstrual health conditions and to manage workers with compassion, sensitivity, and discretion.
- Implement policies that normalize menstruation, such as providing menstrual products and comfort items such as hot pads or water bottles, and other well-being initiatives.

Are employers required to provide menstrual products?

In Canada, starting December 15, 2023, employers in federally regulated workplaces are mandated to provide menstrual products at no cost to workers and readily available in all toilet rooms within the workplace.

Similarly, in Ontario, employers must ensure menstrual products are provided on construction projects lasting more than three months if 20 or more workers are regularly employed at the project.

Some provinces and territories have implemented policies to address menstrual equity in public spaces, which may apply to some workplaces. For example, many initiatives across Canada distribute free menstrual products to schools, women's shelters, resource centres, and food banks. Public libraries in many provinces have also started to provide free menstrual products in their washrooms.

Many employers may choose to offer menstrual products in their washrooms and toilet facilities, just like they provide toilet paper and soap for all workers.

Access to menstrual products can help workers maintain hygiene and prevent health issues caused by reusing products, using products longer than indicated, or not using products at all. Making sure workers have the necessary products can help reduce absenteeism and enhance focus, supporting employee satisfaction and improving workplace productivity.

What are some considerations when providing menstrual products?

When offering menstrual products in the workplace, employers should prioritize health, safety, accessibility, and privacy.

Key considerations include:

- Providing a range of products to accommodate different body types, menstrual flow levels, and worker preferences.
- Selecting unscented or environmentally friendly options, such as tampons with cardboard applicators.
- Acknowledging diverse cultural perspectives, beliefs, and familiarity with various menstrual products.
- Making sure products are stocked in private, convenient locations such as washrooms or designated supply cabinets.
- Maintaining proper disposal facilities with regularly emptied containers and ensuring toilet facilities are well-maintained.

Employers should also make sure that menstrual products remain consistently available to support worker wellbeing and comfort.

Are there other resources available?

Support for menstrual health in the workplace is an evolving topic. Several organizations have established guidelines and have prepared resources to help employers create supportive environments:

- The Government of Canada's [Requirements for employers to provide menstrual products](#) in federally regulated workplaces aims to promote workplace inclusivity and reduce stigma around menstruation in the workplace by providing the necessary resources for menstrual health management.
 - The British Standards Institution (BSI) has developed a workplace standard titled [BS 30416 - Menstruation, Menstrual Health and Menopause in the Workplace](#) to guide employers in addressing menstruation, menstrual health, and menopause.
 - The World Health Organization's (WHO) Statement on [Menstrual Health and Rights](#) recognizes menstrual health as a fundamental health and human rights issue and advocates for workplace policies that ensure access to menstrual products, sanitation, and support systems.
 - Through its report on [Menstruation and support at work](#), the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) highlights the impact of menstruation on workplace experiences and encourages employers to implement policies that support menstrual health.
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