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**RED
MOON
GANG**

**AN INCLUSIVE
GUIDE TO PERIODS**

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Introduction

Growing up, I absolutely hated having a period. I saw it as an inconvenience. Nobody told me it was something that could be managed, or an experience I could make better for myself. My first one happened when I was 11; my mum somehow knew it was coming. Although it was expected, it was still a shock to the system. It was hard to navigate, very bloody and also extremely painful.

From then on I was taught to be prepared for my period to turn up without a moment's notice and always carry pads (Fig. 1) with me. Looking back, this instilled in me a sense of fear. That said, my mum was pretty good at normalizing those sorts of discussions; when your seven-year-old won't stop asking you what a penis is, it not only forces you to have 'The Talk' several years earlier than you expected, but means nothing is off limits! While that was great, and I always felt like I could turn to her with any questions, a lot of negative influences were still present. There was so much out there that made me feel like I had to keep my period secret. Some of my most vivid and earliest memories of menstruation involve delaying plans, worrying about bloodstains and skipping school. Little did I know that these experiences would go on to have a lasting effect and also mark the start of a very long journey with my body.

In my early teens, I became sexually active and started using the contraceptive pill (Fig. 2). Things started off well – it really lessened

Figs 1-2



Figs 3-4



my flow and also reduced pain. It helped my teenage spot-prone skin (Fig. 3) massively, too. However, after a while, the extra hormones I was putting into my body to avoid pregnancy started to mess with me. I would get upset or angry really quickly and wouldn't handle things rationally. I was a pretty moody teenager in any case, and it didn't take long for the pill to send me over the edge. When it started to disagree with me, I would try a different pill. Between the ages of 14 and 20 I must have tried every form available to me. With each pill, different side-effects would arise – suicidal ideation without any explanation, contracting cystitis every time I had sex no matter how careful I was, vaginal dryness, extremely tender boobs (Fig. 4) – you name it, I've experienced it.

I was convinced that my periods would limit me or set me back, and the pill gave me the power to delay or stop them altogether. I would power through the terrible side-effects because I was able to avoid menstruation. Sometimes I would take monthly packets back to back (something my body simply could not handle) if I had a holiday coming up, and eventually just when I couldn't be bothered to have a period. It got to the point where I realized I needed to give my body a break and I'd try to, but I'd inevitably cave every time things got tough. Each month I was met with an overwhelming sense of dread; if I felt even a little bit uncomfortable, I'd jump right back on the pill. Over and over again, unbearable symptoms would all come rushing back, 10 times worse than the month before. There wasn't a day where my boobs didn't ache, my head didn't pound and my vagina didn't feel wrong. It didn't matter that I was suffering, because I wasn't bleeding. It wasn't until I stopped having regular sex that I was able to give my body a break. Yet when I finally gave getting off the pill a proper go, I still couldn't take it. This on-and-off pattern continued and I was stuck in an exhausting cycle for months.

At the age of 22 it was time to face the music: the pill, no matter what brand, just didn't agree with me. Worried about long-term contraception (birth control) options now that I was in a long-term relationship, I turned to the implant instead. Similarly, it started off great. I was able to have sex with ease and it stopped my periods altogether. It also felt more convenient than taking a pill every day. The fact that this thing in my arm would last for years was very appealing to me, and saying goodbye to my periods was a major plus. The honeymoon period didn't last long, though; the negative side-effects this time were the most awful migraines and bleeding at random points in my cycle (which I soon discovered is referred to as 'spotting'). My doctor suggested taking the pill to counteract this, which was something I wasn't prepared to do.

Fig. 5



I attempted to ride it out but the symptoms persisted. At one point, spotting turned into bleeding every two weeks. I would be wiped out every other day from migraines on top of this. Once I had exhausted all the options I was willing to try, I came to the conclusion that I didn't want to use any form of hormonal contraception ever again. Enough was enough; condoms (Fig. 5) would suit me just fine. My body quite clearly couldn't handle not having a period, and the most important thing was getting them back. Something had changed within me and made me question everything I'd ever been told about reproductive health. Why does my period have to be this terrible thing every month that I have to put my life on hold for? Why should I put my body through hell to avoid pregnancy when the person I am having sex with can just wear a condom? Am I approaching this all wrong? Does my body need to bleed? How do I resume some form of normalcy? Is that even achievable? I had so many unanswered questions.

After this decision, my body went rogue. The first six months were hell: I would bleed heavily for days on end, I was in so much

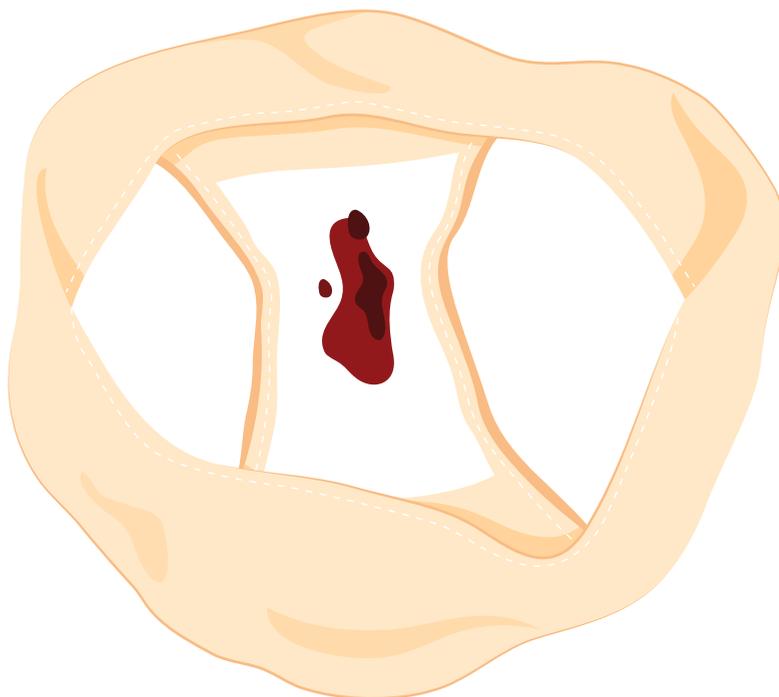
WHAT

WHEN
YOU'RE

TO
EXPECT

PMSING

Blame It on the Hormones



Crying for no apparent reason? Missed your stop on the bus? Accidentally dropped your phone? Hulking out over something trivial? Trapped wind? Blame it on the hormones, babe, it kind of helps.

As if dealing with the sheer volume of fluid that can exit one's body during a period isn't stressful enough, there's a ton of symptoms that come with it too. You may have heard people complain about PMS in passing – or, if you're like me, you just wail, 'I'm PMSing!' at anyone who will listen. It stands for premenstrual syndrome, which refers to symptoms experienced before a period starts. They're a barrel of laughs, I can assure you. It's also commonly referred to as PMT, which stands for premenstrual tension. These symptoms can be physical, mental and sometimes even behavioural. The most commonly discussed symptoms of PMS are feeling bloated, stomach cramps, backaches, sore breasts, breaking out, nausea, food cravings and mood swings. Most onscreen representations of PMS will depict somebody feeling upset, emotional, irritable or angry (sometimes all at once, which to be fair is often an accurate depiction of me when I'm PMSing).

Fig. 18



PMS can start as early as two weeks leading up to a period, but again, some bodies have different ideas. I myself seem to go through a rather tedious pattern. I'll have a couple of somewhat manageable and light periods where I experience PMS for only a few days beforehand and sometimes up until the beginning of my period, followed by one that is complete anarchy. All hell breaks loose around 10 days before my period, when I experience a not-so-festive countdown; it's blood, sweat, irrational anger and tears from start to finish.

Right off the bat, I'm going to say that if you've ever felt that the emotions you go through in the run-up to a period (as well as the speed and intensity at which you fly through them without a moment's notice) make you feel like a ridiculous, irrational person – I promise, you're not alone. As somebody who suffers greatly and often finds themselves on a PMS warpath, I feel you. It's not all in your head. I mean, yes, there are probably times where you've

overreacted, but let me be facetious for a moment, okay? The struggle is real! Besides, you could react badly to something on any day of your cycle; your patience just happens to be pretty thin when blood is exiting your body at a rapid speed! Trust me, your feelings are definitely valid. Anyone who tries to suggest otherwise will automatically be subjected to a rant. Sorry, I don't make the rules.

So, what causes PMS? Like many things relating to reproductive health, the exact cause of PMS isn't fully understood and has not yet been scientifically proven. However, it is strongly suggested that it's due to changes in hormone levels during the menstrual cycle. If you revert back to the previous chapter where the cycle is explained in more detail, this does make sense, considering how hormones are constantly changing. Whether it's an influx of oestrogen or low progesterone (or perhaps a combination of the two), it's bound to have some sort of effect on you.

Sometimes hormone levels change only slightly, which could explain why you're a raging bag of emotions (Fig. 18) while your friend is barely suffering. It's like everything else (such as pain threshold, tastes and allergic reactions) – our bodies have their own unique ways of reacting to changes we go through. As this book progresses, you'll see we're all about the lesser-discussed parts of menstruation here. Chances are, if you've experienced something that happens around your period that you thought wasn't just coincidental, you might find a reason for it. If not, just comfort me, okay? Please. Let's get a PMS support group going; we can all cry together. As hormone changes are thought to be the biggest contributing factor, it's a time when I blame absolutely everything and anything on them. I'm giving you permission to do so too, and if you've been menstruating for a while now, I think you've more than earned the right!

Let's explore this hormone theory a little more. In case you weren't aware, hormones are an extremely complicated (fun!) system in the human body. They're responsible for a ton of things that affect our everyday lives, such as sleeping patterns, weight fluctuations, growth and development and, of course, our moods. They should rise and fall fluidly but they're in an incredibly delicate balance, so it doesn't always work out that way. Ideally you want your body to cycle through its functions without difficulty, and hormones play

a key part in that. Let's circle back to our all-important duo oestrogen and progesterone; think of them as the yin and yang of your cycle. Oestrogen is the active yang, while progesterone is the yin that grounds us. Too much yang without yin to balance us out can cause issues: for example, elevated levels of oestrogen have been linked to anxiety. This could also explain why so many people find the contraceptive pill makes their mood change, as they are essentially pumping more hormones into their bodies.

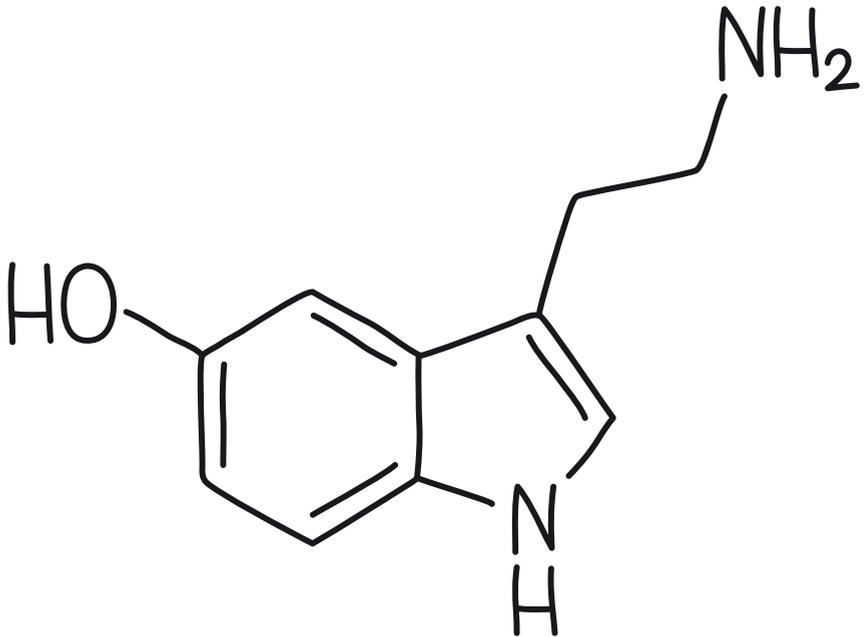
People who already suffer with their mental health may find PMS hits them particularly hard, as chemical levels in the brain can fluctuate during this time as well. One that fluctuates in particular is serotonin (Fig. 19), a chemical known to help balance and regulate moods that make you feel happier. When oestrogen starts to drop, serotonin can too; people with mental illnesses that stem from low serotonin levels (depression, anxiety and OCD, to name a few) are likely to find the unpleasant symptoms of PMS more disruptive. As somebody who suffers with both anxiety and depression, I know my PMS symptoms are definitely worse when I'm going through a bad time mentally. Despite this, nobody seems to really talk about the extent to which PMS can affect you emotionally. Sometimes, I find it near impossible to function; I become completely tongue-tied and forget things. I can be in the middle of talking and completely lose my train of thought or add in a nonsensical word. Often, self-doubt will wash over me and I'll find it hard to focus.

I wanted to find out if others feel overwhelmed in the run-up to their period, as I do. I spoke to a range of people while writing this book, and it has been comforting to find that many of them experience this frustration and self-doubt too. It can be a very isolating time for many of us and no matter how familiar you are with menstruating, it doesn't always get easier. Of all the ways unbalanced hormones affect me, one of the most annoying symptoms has to be my heightened emotions and more sensitive state. I'm a water sign (Cancer, represent!), so I'm pretty emotional on any given day, but in the run-up to my period it reaches new heights. Everything generally hits me a lot harder; the tiniest and most insignificant thing can set me off. Joking about this element of PMS or a particularly fragile mental state can bring comfort, of course, but sometimes

these situations can also be really tough to navigate, especially when you've got to get on with things!

One person I spoke to told me about a time when her emotions were more upsetting than amusing: 'I really wanted a can of Pepsi, so I went to the shop but found it was closed. Naturally, I spent 20 minutes crying in bed about it. Sounds funny and ridiculous, but it's actually horrible having no control over your emotions and feeling like you've ruined your weekend.' This is something many of us can relate to. A lot of people don't take mental health seriously enough as it is – whether it's observing our own mental state or considering the wellbeing of others – but it's high time we did.

Fig. 19





DID YOU KNOW?

The amount of sunlight outside can sometimes impact the length of a menstrual cycle. Research has shown that people generally experience shorter periods in the summertime. One paper published in 2011 discovered that cycles were 0.9 days shorter in the summer in comparison with winter, along with increased frequency of ovulation and increased hormone secretion.



If you've ever experienced worse premenstrual symptoms during the colder months, you're not alone. When it's cold, many of us spend more time indoors, meaning we move around less or maybe eat more (which, I mean, fair). Sometimes, this can have a negative effect on premenstrual symptoms, as it has been found that those who are more active have more manageable symptoms than those who don't exercise as much.

AROUND

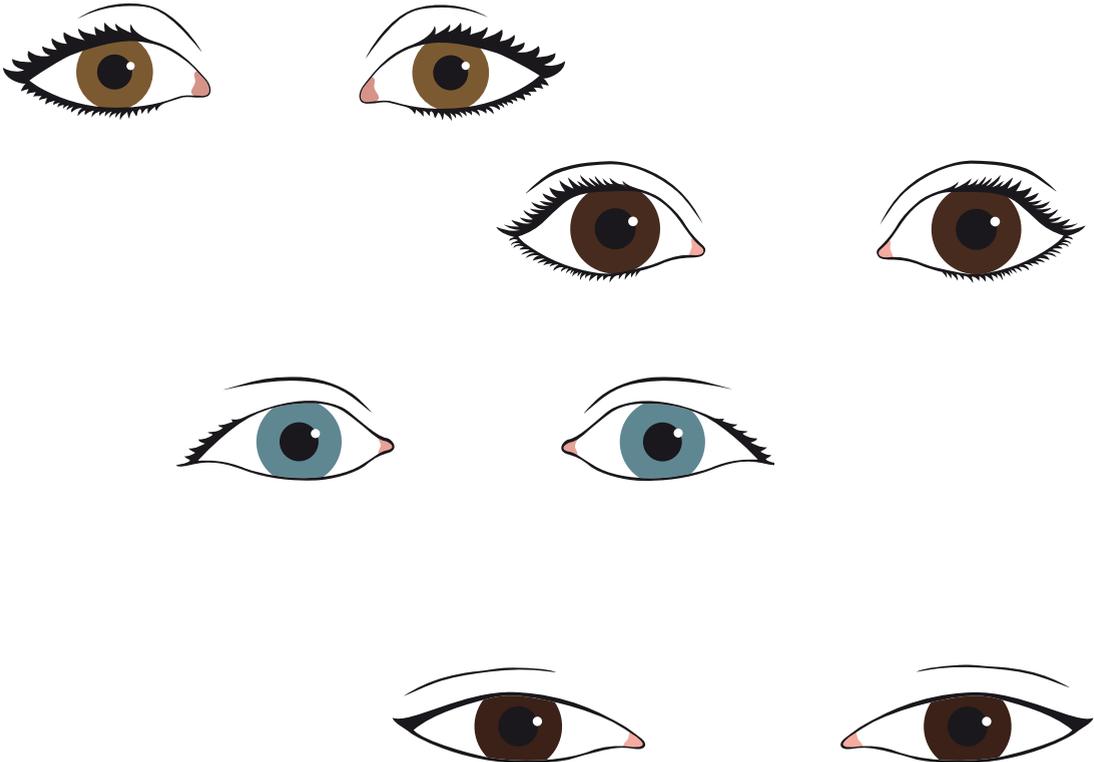
IN 30

THE
WORLD
PERIODS

Periods Are Viewed Differently Across the Globe



By this point I think we can agree that the body's monthly(ish) visitor is a pretty natural part of life. But no matter how many times this visitor unexpectedly turns up, periods remain taboo across the globe. Although there's no shortage of things we can blame this on, there is no denying that tradition and a lack of education are two of the biggest factors. Undoing years of harmful practice is no small feat. When an act as simple as telling someone your period has arrived is still frowned upon, what impact does it have and how does one break the cycle of misinformation? Let's explore how period stigma affects people globally and the incredible activists working to solve this societal problem.



You Could Be Banished to a Hut

If people know you're on your period in certain parts of Nepal and India, you may be forced to bleed it out in a hut (Fig. 38). In Nepal, the beliefs behind this practice – called *Chhaupadi* – stem from Hinduism and dictate what somebody on their period can do, what they can eat, when they can sleep and whom they can interact with. These sheds are often dark, unhygienic and unbearable in any weather, not to mention riddled with insects, dung and whatever muck animals bring in. If cattle sheds are not available, a makeshift hut is used instead.

Although this custom was outlawed by Nepal's supreme court in 2005, the practice is still very much in place. Radha Paudel, head of organization Action Works Nepal (AWON), says this tradition is so instilled that, when abroad, some Nepalese people still practise it. She also told *The Guardian* that, in places where land is too expensive, people will still live separately during their periods – even if the family rents only a single room. This tradition has been linked to psychological and physical illnesses, danger of attack from both people and wild animals, as well as the possibility of death.

Huts in India are known as *gaokors*. In the part of the world where the practice occurs they don't allow those who are menstruating to cook, even if they're alone. Instead, the hut's occupants rely on family to bring food and other items, sometimes as far as to the edge of the forest. Many are forced to live in isolation for one week a month and, since the *gaokors* are considered public property, nobody maintains them – so when it rains, it pours. Water often finds a way in, and roofs leak. In 2015, the NGO Society for Peoples Action in Rural Services and Health (SPARSH) visited 223 *gaokors* in tribal areas and found that 98 per cent of them were missing proper beds, let alone electricity and other basic amenities. A thick sheet is often

used in place of a mattress, and this doubles up as a cushion during the daytime. They also found that the majority of the inhabitants of these huts create makeshift bathrooms out of bamboo. In addition, with the huts being so far away, many people have died from injuries from wild animals, like snake bites, while staying there. The custom of sending people to huts is so ingrained in India that local self-governing bodies work towards bringing huts closer to the village – instead of trying to eradicate the practice altogether.

Fig. 38

