Menstrual hygiene management factsheet for women with blindness or low vision

These suggestions are for both women who have low vision and for women who are totally blind, so not all of them might work for you. You might also find it helpful to share some of these strategies with your family, so they know what works well for you, and what they can help you with. They’re just ideas; feel free to adapt them and make up your own strategies! We’d love to hear from you if you have other ideas!

Knowing when your period is due

- As time goes on and you've been getting your period for a longer time, it should settle down into a regular cycle. Most women find that they get their period for 5-8 days per month. Using the Calendar app on your smartphone or a paper calendar, and circling the days that you get your period can give you a good idea of when you should expect it.
- Learn to listen to your body to know when your period is due. Many women experience premenstrual symptoms such as irritability or feeling more like they're going to cry, tender breasts or a sore lower back about 1-3 days before they get their period. Menstrual cramps can also warn you your period is due.
- Put a panty liner or pad in your underwear one or two days before you expect your period to start, so that if it comes sooner, you won't have a leak on your underwear.

Choosing between pads or tampons

- This comes down to personal preference or necessity!
- Both pads and tampons come in ‘ultra thin’ pads or ‘mini’ tampons for women with a light flow, or the start or the end of your period. There are also ‘regular’ pads and tampons, as well as ‘maxi’ pads or ‘super’ tampons for women with a heavy flow, or for the middle days of your period when your flow is often heavier.
- Many women use a combination of pads and tampons, depending on their activities, and a combination of different kinds of pads or tampons, depending on their flow. (Many women have a lighter flow at the start and end of their period, and a heavier flow for the middle days.)
- If you want to go swimming or play sport while you have your period, tampons are a good idea. (They are a necessity if you go swimming!) They don’t change position if you’re running around like pads might, and they can feel a lot more comfortable when you’re active.
- Because of the risk of Toxic Shock Syndrome (TTS), a tampon should never be worn for more than eight hours, so it is best not to wear them to bed.

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• Overnight pads are longer than daytime pads, and can help prevent leaks while you’re lying down in bed. Some people wear two pads when they go to bed (one lined up touching the other on the short end) for the same reason.

• Many women like using pads with wings. These pads have small tabs on the side (the ‘wings’) which curl around and stick on the other side of your underwear. These help the pad to stay in the right place, and not bunch up in the middle of the gusset of your underwear, which could allow menstrual fluid to leak onto your clothes.

• Pads can be tricky to learn how to position accurately in your underwear so no menstrual fluid leaks onto your underwear or outer garments. One way of positioning your pad in the same place every time is by feeling for one of the two folds in your new pad, and lining it up with the front seam on the gusset of your underwear. If you do this every time, the pad should be in the same position every time. You may need to practice (it can be a bit of trial-and-error!) moving your pad a little bit forward of this position, or a little bit back, to get it in the right place for your body.

• If you want to start using tampons, please make sure you understand the contents of the instruction booklets that come in every box of tampons. Unfortunately, they are always written in a very small font, and currently the manufactures of these products do not have these instructions available online, so you may need to practice your confidence skills and ask someone you trust to read it to you.

• Tampons that are packaged in a wrapper that requires a dual twisting motion (like giving someone a ‘Chinese wrist burn’) may be easier to open, because this doesn’t rely on visual information to find out which part of the plastic wrapper you’re supposed to open it from. When you find out which brands package their tampons like that, make sure to remember!

Knowing when to change your pad or tampon

• Tampons need to be changed at a maximum of every eight hours, to prevent Toxic Shock Syndrome. However, many women find they need to change them more often than this.

• You may be able to see the contrast of the dark menstrual fluid on the white pad. When the menstrual fluid covers most of the pad, it is time to change it!

• It may help to set a timer on your phone, and just get in to the routine of changing your pad or tampon every 2 or 4 hours, depending on how heavy your flow is. When you’re at school, maybe you could change it at recess, at lunch, and before you leave at the end of the day?

• Because menstrual fluid is fluid, when a pad absorbs it, the pad gets a bit heavier. You could cup your hand underneath the gusset of your underwear and learn to feel how heavy your pad is, and learn this way when you need to change it.
Preventing and managing leaks of menstrual fluid

- Learn how to position your pad accurately for your body (it is slightly different for each person), so it catches your menstrual fluid and doesn’t allow any to leak onto your clothing.
- Change your pad or tampon frequently (as needed), so it doesn’t get full, because if it gets full it may leak.
- Be sure to carry a spare, clean pair of underwear in your school bag to change in to if you leak on your underwear.
- Wear light coloured underwear, so you can see the contrast of the dark menstrual fluid against it if there is a leak.
- Wear dark coloured outer garments when you have your period or are expecting your period, so if there is a leak it will be a lot less obvious.
- Feel your underwear around the edges of your pad with your fingers to feel if there is any damp patches. These are likely to be caused from a leak. Change your underwear to a clean pair straight away (and be sure to put a pad in to this new pair!). Also feel your outer clothing, because if there was a leak onto your underwear, it may also have got onto your pants, shorts, dress or skirt.
- If you’re wearing pants or shorts, the most common place for a leak is in the crotch, right between your legs.
- If you have been lying down without using an overnight pad (which are longer than day use pads), there is a chance you might have a leak on your bottom. Many women ask their trusted (sighted) friends to check their bottoms by walking behind them, and tell them if there’s a leak. This can help ease your mind if you’re worried!
- Some women wear overnight pads during the day, just to give them a greater margin of error to prevent leaks. This might be especially helpful if you have a heavier flow.
- If there’s been a leak on your outer garments, you could tie a jumper around your waist to cover it. Your school nurse might have a spare change of clothes or a spare school uniform for you to use for the rest of the day. You could also ask your friends or teacher for help with this.

Disposing of pads or tampons

- When its time to change your pad or tampon, it helps to be organised. Make sure you have the next pad or tampon ready to use!
- If you’re using a pad, unpeel it from your underwear, and roll it up into a ‘log’. Wrap this in toilet paper. If you’re using a tampon, remove it from your vagina (you will probably need to squat above the toilet to do this), and wrap it in toilet paper.
- At home, you should ask your family if you can get a small rubbish bin to put near the toilet for you to put your used pads or tampons in.
- Some women like having small paper bags next to the toilet to put their used pad or tampon in first, before putting it in the rubbish bin.

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• Helpful hint: after a day or two, old pads or tampons can get quite smelly. If you’re the one in your family who has her period, it might be your job to empty this little rubbish bin into the big wheelie bin outside!

Disposing pads or tampons in unfamiliar places

• If you’re using an unfamiliar bathroom, it can be tricky to know how to dispose of your used pad or tampon. There are many different kinds of sanitary disposal bins, and they can be found in many different places. Sometimes there might be a little round bin with a foot pedal to lift up the hinge lid; sometimes there might be a small metal rectangular box screwed to the wall of the cubicle with a lid; sometimes you are expected to use the same large bin that is provided for used paper towels. Sometimes there might not be any kind of bin!

• In Australia, many public bathrooms have a tall rectangular bin in each cubicle located in the corner of the cubicle behind where you’re seated when you sit on the toilet. This kind of sanitary disposal bin has a lid that you lift from one end, place your toilet-paper-wrapped-used-product on a little tray under the lid, then lower the lid.

• You may find it helpful to work with your Orientation and Mobility Specialist to get familiar with the bathrooms at school, and learn where the sanitary bins are found in each cubicle.

• It may be useful to get into the habit of locating the sanitary disposal bin with your long cane before you sit down on the toilet.

• Every so often, these bins can be a little dirty, from other women not being neat or considerate. Because of this, some women prefer to bring ziplock bags with them, and put their toilet-paper-wrapped-used-sanitary-product in a ziplock bag, and dispose of this themselves when they get home.

• In your little ‘period kit’, you may want to consider carrying wet wipes, to wipe down the sanitary disposal bin before you touch it. Just make sure you dispose of the wipes in that bin too, and don’t flush them down the toilet! (They can clog the pipes, and no one wants a toilet that won’t flush! Yuck!)

Identifying your preferred item in your bathroom cupboard

• You could use the same organisational strategies you use for finding other objects, such as always putting the same thing back in the same place, and making sure your family members know that if they move it, you won’t be able to find it.

• You could use medium-sized cardboard boxes, and put all your panty liners in one, all your ultra thin pads in another, and all your overnight pads in a third (for example). If these boxes are always in the same order, in the same place on the same shelf, you should be able to find what you’re looking for. You could even label each box with Braille or tactile markers.

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• Some pad manufactures package their individual pads in a cardboard box, while others use a soft plastic outer packaging. You could buy one kind of pad from one company, and another kind of pad from another company, so you’ll know which is which by feeling the outer packaging.

• Different kinds of pads are different thicknesses, so when they are packaged in their individual soft plastic packaging, if you pinch the package between your thumb and index finger they will feel different. For example, ultra thin pads will feel thinner than regular pads, which in turn will feel thinner than maxi pads. Often, overnight pads feel like a bigger square, because they are longer, even if they feel the same thickness as a daytime pad.

• If you’re using pads that have an outer packaging made of soft plastic, you may be able to feel through the outer packaging, to feel how thick each individually packaged pad is. As discussed above, this may help you identify which kind of pads you’re holding by their thickness.

• Different kinds of tampons are different circumferences, so their boxes will be slightly bigger or smaller, depending on if they’re mini (smaller box), or super (slightly bigger box). With practice you’ll be able to tell straight away which box you’re holding.

Identifying your preferred item in the supermarket

• This can be tricky, because often there is a lot of choice! (Most sighted women get confused by this too!) Even though other family members might do the supermarket shopping for your household now, this is an important skill to have for when you move out, or if you go on holiday and don’t have your family there. It might be a good idea to start practicing this skill while you still go to the supermarket with your Mum or Dad, so they can help you learn how to do this by yourself.

• Becoming familiar with the outer packaging if your products can take a bit of practice, but if you learn what you’re looking for, it makes it easier to find. Magnifiers or apps on smart phones that identify the products can help.

• Each brand often uses one main colour on their outer packaging, and another colour to show the kind of item it is. For example, with pads, there might be different colours for ultra thin, regular, maxi or overnight and with or without wings. Learning which combination of colours you’re looking for can help you find the item you want.

• You could use a barcode scanner or a barcode scanner app on your phone.

• Once you know roughly where in the supermarket aisle your preferred products are kept, you could ask your Orientation and Mobility Specialist to help you learn to get to that location quickly and simply. (But be aware that every now and again supermarkets change where they store items on their shelves, or which aisles have which products in them...!)

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• If you’re going away on holiday, take more pads and/or tampons then you think you’ll need, so you don’t have to worry about figuring out a new supermarket!
• Ordering these products online in the privacy of your own home with your computer’s screen reading software can be quicker and easier than buying them in person at the supermarket.
• Your family or friends will probably be quite happy to help you find the right item in the supermarket if you can explain exactly what it is you want. You might need to tell them the kind of product, the brand, and the type, eg. “I need Libra pads that are ultrathin with wings.” If you know what the outer packaging looks like and can describe the main colour/s, that could help too.

**Final tips**

• Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Other women in your life, like your Mum, sisters, cousins, aunts, family friends, or girlfriends, even if they don’t have the same level of vision as you, may be really helpful. After all, getting your period isn’t related to your level of vision!
• Some women experience lots of period pain, which is no fun. Please feel confident to talk with your doctor if you experience period pain or a very heavy flow, as they might have some ideas for you that could help manage this.
• Occupational therapists are professionals who are there to help you learn to do the everyday activities in your life (like managing your menstrual hygiene) with whatever level of vision you have. There might be an occupational therapist who works at your school; otherwise, you can try your local blindness and low vision organisation. Ring them to set up an appointment with an occupational therapist, and don’t be afraid to talk with them about the tasks your having difficulty doing. (You can probably request a female occupational therapist when you ring to make an appointment.)
• As discussed above, your Orientation and Mobility Specialists can be really helpful teaching you ways to find the right item in the supermarket, or where to find sanitary disposal bins in public toilets. Don’t be afraid to ask them for help if you need it!
• Getting your period can be exciting and a little bit scary. Although you have a few extra challenges than sighted women, don’t forget that every women goes through this, and it’s part of growing up. As you get older and have had more practice managing these tasks, they’ll get easier and easier!

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