



Your Menstrual Cycle – Knowing What's Normal vs. Common



Image courtesy of Natalia Lavrenkova

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“Hey...I’m on my period and I can’t come into work today.”

Okay, maybe you don’t tell your boss you are on your period. But how many times have you had to take a day off (or two...or three?) from work or school because you are bent over clutching a heating pad on your lower belly in pain, hoping the Ibuprofen will kick in, or you’ll feel some sort of relief from the cramps. Or, maybe you don’t have serious cramps but your flow is so much that you leak every pad and tampon almost every hour? Maybe your cycle is unpredictable and you’ve been bleeding for the past 4 weeks.

Trust me. I get it. I see it all the time in my office. I’ve also been there. I was told that all of this is completely normal.

Guess what? It’s actually not normal.

Just because something is common does not make it normal.

A normal period may be associated with mild, not severe cramps.

A normal period should occur every 28–32 days (every month)

You should NOT have to take days off every month to deal with your cycle.



South Asian women have it hard because there is a huge stigma around menstrual cycles. Some deem this part of our life as “dirty” or something that has to stay hush hush. Oftentimes, our parents (especially father figures) are not willing to talk about it. In Naturopathic Medical School, we are taught to think of a woman’s period as her fifth vital sign—blood pressure, heart rate, temperature, respiratory rate being the others. It is an indicator of hormonal health. So why is it that something that says SO much about our health is something that we need to stay silent about?

The other issue can be seen when we look at South Asian women and PCOS. PCOS, or polycystic ovarian syndrome, is one of the most common endocrine disorders in women. This condition is diagnosed by assessing for signs of high androgen hormones, the presence of cysts on the ovaries, and irregular or absent cycles. You need to have 2/3 of these to satisfy the criteria that would deem you a person with PCOS. Women with PCOS will also often present with difficulty losing weight, acne (especially cystic acne), and dark course facial hair.

According to a research study, South Asians with PCOS will present with irregular periods much younger than that of non-South Asian women. Concerns of irregular cycles are often dismissed, as they are told that things should normalize, or told “this is how it is.” Often times the pill is the only solution that is suggested with no investigations into the root cause of her irregular cycles. South Asian women with PCOS had more prevalent symptoms as well. These symptoms include irregular periods, facial hair growth, acne, acanthosis nigrans (darkening of skin folds including the armpits, groin and neck), and secondary infertility.

The other issue with this specific population is that South Asian women will often present with “lean” PCOS. This is a phenotype of PCOS in which rather than the more common overweight presentation, these people with PCOS are of an average or underweight phenotype. The lean type of PCOS is less common and an investigation of PCOS despite having all of the other symptoms is often neglected.

It is my mission as a Naturopathic Doctor to normalize, not stigmatize periods. To ensure women are educated on their periods—on what is normal and when to seek help. It is also important to have the information so you can ADVOCATE for your health. Just because someone THINKS something is normal does not mean you have to settle for a truly abnormal cycle. A period should be predictable. and not hold you back in life.

Don’t settle for your symptoms if they are not normal. Advocate for further investigations because your cycle should not hold you back from being your best self. Speak to your health care provider if you have noticed any of the above symptoms. They are not normal and they warrant an investigation.



Dr. Henna Plahe, ND is a second generation South Asian Canadian from London, Ontario. She is a Naturopathic Doctor in Cambridge and is passionate about educating women on their health issues. She helps women find the root cause of their symptoms and find natural solutions so they can pursue their dreams without their health getting in the way.