



Surprise! Your Period's Here!

Do you worry about getting your period all of a sudden and not being prepared? Well, older menstruators have been there. A few of them tell us about being ready for all sorts of period moments.

Narration: Welcome to Feeling My Flo...a podcast where we see menstruation as an event that happens to all types of bodies. I'm Kamilah Kashanie. My pronouns are she and her.

If you've listened to Feeling My Flo before, you've probably heard bits and pieces of my period experience. I got my period when I was 10, so I've had over half my life to work on my relationship with it. But no matter how long I've been menstruating, it's not always easy to figure out when my period is paying me a visit.

There have been times I think I have a solid week left before my period starts and then my body's like, 'Nope. Time for a period!'

We wanted to know if other menstruators had stories to share about unexpected leaks or surprise periods. So we asked.

Odalys: My name is Odalys, I'm 35 years old.

Danielle: My name is Danielle, my pronouns are she/her.

Kaiti: My name is Kaiti, and I use the pronouns she/her/hers.

Dupe: My name is Dupe, I go by she/her.

Narration: People who have been menstruating for years have plenty of stories to share. Some of them involved a not-so-great fashion choice...

Odalys: I had this pair of white pants...

Jimena: ...short white miniskirt...

Narration: Others were caught totally unprepared!

Kaiti: I had no paper. No water...not even a spare sock!

Narration: Some were just surprised by the bleeding itself.

Dupe: How am I bleeding so much? I remember, just like, being really bewildered. Is there something wrong, did my pad shift?

Narration: Stories of menstruators who got their periods unexpectedly...are legendary.

Christina: My mom's from a really big family and we were all hanging out and we were going to do something fun for the day.

Narration: That's Christina. She uses she/her pronouns.

Christina: And so the question was should we go to Six Flags or should we go to a water park? And I desperately wanted to go to Six Flags.

Narration: Christina begged and begged. But it was summer. It was hot. Everyone else wanted the waterpark, so she was outvoted.

Christina: I just remember I got so panicked. I think I just started crying and my mom had to be like, 'Christina, what is wrong?'

My aunt Penny, my aunt Pam, my aunt Anne, and my mom and well, you know, I told them what was going on that I wasn't going to be able to have any fun that day 'cause I had my period and I didn't know how to um, wear a tampon.

Narration: Christina's aunts got together to support her.

Christina: And I just remember my aunt Anne, saying, like, 'Oh honey, it's okay. You're going to have just as much fun as the rest of us. Here's what we're going to do. You're gonna stick a pad in your bathing suit. And that's that. That is that. Nobody will be able to see it. And, um, when you go on water rides, just go change it when it gets waterlogged.'

Narration: It ended up being such a fun day. It was Christina's first time on a lazy river...and she especially loved riding down steep water slides.

Christina: I do think there were a couple of points where I, like, sat down on this waterlogged pad and squeezed out a little blood, but I wiped it up, changed my pad and went on.

Narration: Pads fill up with water when they get wet. While it's not dangerous to wear one at a pool, it can get messy, and it's not the most hygienic option.

We spoke to a nurse practitioner who recommended trying tampons or menstrual cups when you're swimming. And if you're not ready for that yet, [some swim suit bottoms have built-in absorbent layers for menstruating swimmers](#). It's also okay to pass on water

activities if that's what's right for you.

Wanting to wear a bathing suit is always tricky when a person is on their period. But sometimes the issue is not water, but air. As in, being 30,000 feet in the air.

Anna: Hi, my name is Anna. My pronouns are she and her.

Narration: Anna got her period when she was 11 years old.

Anna: I was on a plane ride back from Spain to Florida. I had been visiting family with my mom and dad.

Narration: You heard right...an airborne plane!

Anna: At some point in the flight, I had to go to the bathroom. So I got up, I went into the stall, I locked the door, and when I pulled my pants down, I saw a pool of blood.

Narration: She froze. But eventually realized she couldn't just sit there...

Anna: So I started looking around the bathroom and thankfully back then, there were still free pads in the bathrooms of airplanes. So I put a pad on. Thankfully, I knew what it was and how to handle it and wash my hands. And as I left, I could've sworn that everyone around the bathroom was looking at me, although probably nobody was..

Narration: Getting your period on a flight sounds scary. Especially if it's your first period. But there's one place where almost every menstruator has worried about getting their period.

Kendra: It was the second day of sixth grade and I was still just learning the ropes of my new middle school.

Narration: That's Kendra. She uses she/her pronouns. When Kendra was a student, she took a lot of music and theater classes. One particular morning, she was in guitar class.

Kendra: And I remember sitting there, playing —learning how to play 'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star' and just feeling kind of weird and just this weird sensation that I had never felt before.

Narration: Kendra asked Ms. Giuliano, the music teacher, if she could go to the bathroom. And on the way out the door, she realized a big red stain had spread on the back of her white overalls.

Kendra: And I was mortified and I didn't know if anybody had seen me, um, before I left class. And I just had all these thoughts and emotions and was panicking and you know, all these things running through my head. I remember taking toilet paper and making like a little makeshift pad.

Narration: Kendra stared at herself in the bathroom mirror and knew she had to get back to class.

Kendra: So I remember going back and like pretending that I had this like crazy, flu thing and she was looking at me like, 'Kendra, you were fine literally two minutes ago.'... I remember walking to the nurse's office with my backpack, sort of like slouching down to cover my butt. And I remember going to the nurse like pulling this whole Meryl Streep act, being like, 'I'm sick!' [Fake coughs.] And she was like, 'All right, sit down, um, let's, like see how you feel...'

Narration: Kendra says she was so embarrassed, she didn't tell the nurse what was actually going on. She spent the rest of the day in the nurse's office, pretending she had the flu until her mom came to pick her up.

For the record, school nurses are trained for moments like this. The nurse probably would've done her best to help if she knew what was going on.

Getting an unexpected period leak in school has happened to the best of us. I definitely had my share of visits to the nurse's office when I was menstruating in school. But a lot of the menstruators we talked with said they had dealt with leaks in even more uncontrolled environments.

Jana Barber: So this is when I was on a teen program and we were in, not fully backcountry, but we had a porta potty...kind of an outhouse rather than a flushable toilet.

Narration: That's Jana Barber. She uses she/her pronouns and she's a lifelong camper.

Every summer since the third grade, Jana would spend her summers at sleepaway camp in Fremont, Michigan. And that meant she dealt with a lot of unexpected period leaks!

She remembers this one time, with a friend.

Jana: So this is when I was on a teen program and we were in, not fully backcountry, but we had a porta potty...kind of an outhouse rather than a flushable toilet.

It was all the girls in one tent together and she abruptly, like, left...and we were worried because we thought she was sick or something went wrong. And three of us ran after her and saw that she ran to the outhouse and we were like, 'Okay, what's going on? Are you okay? And she was just like, 'I have my period.' We were like, 'Okay...okay, that's fine. Like, let's handle this.'

Because we were in an outhouse, we had to find a place to put tampon wrappers, and so our counselor informed us that we kind of had a bag on the side and we could just stick it in there so not to clog...cause everything in there was supposed to be compostable.

Narration: This was a coed camp...with boys and girls. And everyone used the same bathroom. Jana and her friends were worried that the boys would find out when they saw the tampon Wrapper.

Jana: And it was funny because you kind of assume teenage boys would be immature about it. Or at least that was our assumption...but one of them found out and was just like, 'Is this a tampon wrapper?' We were like, 'Yeah...' And they're like, 'Oh, okay.' It just quickly became, like, not a big deal at all.

Narration: Periods at camp can be particularly challenging for a few reasons.

Jana: Your schedule is a bit out of your hands. [Laughs.] Sometimes we'll go from one water activity to a dry camp activity to another water activity. I think for me, like, water activities was always a big one because, I know if I go swimming with a tampon in and then kind of sit out for a little bit, like, if I don't change it pretty immediately, that can be very uncomfortable.

Narration: Jana loved her experience at camp so much, she ended up coming back as a camp counselor.

Jana: Being a camp counselor, it's kind of like being a nurse where you just have to get used to bodily fluids. It's really, like, not an option.

Narration: She says it's common for kids to vomit suddenly. Or poop on themselves. Or have a heavier period than they normally would. The physical activity, being outdoors for long periods of time, the nerves and excitement of being away from home, sometimes for the first time...it can be a lot.

Jana: Your body is really shocked and more shocked than even your brain is.

Narration: Camp counselors have seen it all. As a counselor, Jana shows campers where the extra pads are.

She teaches them how to properly dispose of pads and tampons, so they don't damage the natural environment. And she helps them stick to a schedule so they have time to change their products in between activities.

But even if camp is an unpredictable and challenging environment...some of Jana's most precious memories are from camp.

Jana: Something about the combo of nature and living together and not having many boundaries, really just forms deeper bonds...

I think one of the blessings of camp is that things that could be very embarrassing and very sensitive, just aren't because we don't really have the luxury of them being sensitive.

Narration: I don't know about you, but I definitely feel good after hearing all these stories. A lot of menstruators have embarrassing moments, but we keep it moving.

Feeling My Flo wants to help you start important conversations at critical moments...like when you get caught out there with an unexpected period!

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Mia Warren produced this episode. She's our executive producer. Virginia Lora contributed to writing it. It was mixed by Kojin Tashiro. Cedric Wilson is our lead producer. I'm Kamilah Kashanie.

CITATION

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