



What's a Period REALLY Like?

In this episode, we tackle some of the biggest period-related questions out there — from how to put in a tampon to what vaginal discharge is all about.

Narration: This is 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 heard other episodes of Feeling My Flo, you know we talk a lot about how periods make people feel emotionally. But some of the questions we've gotten from our listeners are about the experience of having a period. Like what does it feel like? And how do we deal with the actual physical experience?

So we're going straight to the period experts to get answers.

Becca Harkleroad : Half the people on the planet get a period. It's absolutely normal to be scared, anxious, uncertain. It's absolutely normal to be happy and excited or sad and devastated. Whatever you're feeling is okay.

Narration: That's Becca Harkleroad. Her pronouns are she and her.

Becca: I'm a registered nurse and a nationally certified school nurse. And I am a middle school nurse in Austin, Texas.

Narration: Becca works in a big school. She's the only nurse taking care of 1,600 students...not to mention all the teachers, staff, and visitors who need medical care. Working in a middle school, she helps a lot of menstruators who are getting their period for the first time.

Becca: If you're nervous and you're anxious about starting your period, I just want to remind you...it's part of growing up...and even though you may feel like you're the only person in the world that's going through this and you're going to feel like all eyes are on you and all eyes are on your butt to see if you're bleeding, it's not the case because everybody around you is thinking the same thing about themselves.

Narration: One of the questions that's come up over and over among our listeners is a question many new menstruators face...how to put a tampon in. We wanted to guide you through that with Becca's help.

Okay, so first — a tampon is a small cylinder made of cotton or rayon fabric. It's absorbent. When you take off the wrapper, you'll see it's typically enclosed in cardboard or plastic.

Becca: So you know that there's the big outer chamber and then the smaller inner chamber, which we call the plunger. Sometimes it can be uncomfortable at first when you're putting them in until you get used to it.

But if you make sure that you've relaxed your body, that's going to help a lot, uh, because when your muscles are tense, the openings of your body are going to be tightened up.

Narration: Relax. Take some deep breaths. Becca also recommends washing your hands before you touch and insert a tampon.

Becca: You may have to touch yourself on the outside or the inside. If you need to, use your nondominant hand to kind of spread the folds of your labia, kind of open that area so that the entrance is easier to access.

Narration: Sit on the toilet, with your knees spread apart. Use your dominant hand, the one you use to write with. And hold the tampon at a diagonal angle, facing towards your body.

Becca: You're going to want to hold it, so...if you've got your palm open to your face.

Narration: Imagine your hand is parallel to the ground, with your palm facing up.

Becca: And you close your fingers, that's the direction that you want the tampon to be pointing. You would hold it with your thumb and your middle finger on the ridges, like the edge between the outer barrel and the inner barrel, or the plunger. And you would just insert it...and you'll kind of angle it backwards a little bit. Um, like towards your back.

Narration: And you'll push it in as far as you can until your thumb and middle finger touch your body.

Becca: And at that point, you will push the plunger with your index finger...so what you're doing there is you've got the whole thing, the applicator inside your body and then by pushing that plunger, you're actually inserting the tampon itself further up into your vagina. It shouldn't be painful, but it's gonna feel uncomfortable the first few times that you do it while you're getting used to it.

Narration: I started my period when I was ten. And I didn't know much about tampons, so I used pads for years. I have kind of a heavy flow, so I would have to change my pads pretty often.

After starting college, my days were really long and really busy. When I was on my period, I hated going to the bathroom so often to put a new pad on.

It's not healthy, or particularly comfortable, to keep a pad on for longer than a couple hours. So, a good friend of mine suggested I try tampons instead.

I remember she actually sat in front of the bathroom door and talked me through my first time inserting one. Honestly, it took some practice, and it did feel uncomfortable the first couple of times. But now, inserting one is pretty regular for me.

Phyllis Fagell: I've gotten it down to a science. It's like my secret super skill, is helping parents teach their girls how to use a tampon.

Narration: That's Phyllis Fagell. She uses she/her pronouns. You might have heard her words of wisdom on Feeling My Flo before.

Phyllis is a licensed clinical counselor who also works at a middle school. She says she's often helped parents teach their kids how to use a tampon.

For your first few times, Phyllis recommends a little trick.

Phyllis: One of the things that is helpful is to buy a tube of KY jelly. I would get a small tampon, one of the less absorbent ones. I would ensure that your child is far enough into their period that they're not going to attempt to put it in when it's going to hurt.

On the way in, they're also less likely to get it in far enough to be comfortable. And then you want to discourage them — once it's in all the way — from pulling it out too soon because that's painful. And if they pull it out too soon and it's very uncomfortable, they may be reluctant to try again.

So what's helpful is — wait 'til the right moment, 'til their flow is heavy enough. Put the KY or some other lubricating jelly on a small tampon. Have your child stand in front of the toilet with the lid closed, put one foot on the toilet and then use their other hand to try to put the tampon in.

Narration: Once you get the tampon in, pull the applicator out of your body with your fingers.

Becca: You should not feel a tampon when it's in your body. So if you're feeling it and you're feeling like part of your body is squeezing around the tampon, you probably don't have it up there far enough.

Narration: That's Nurse Becca again. She says there are a couple of ways to fix a weird-feeling tampon.

Becca: So your options are, you can either pull that one out and start over with a brand new tampon and applicator and repeat the process and just make sure you go further in with your fingers with the applicator so that you get it deeper in your

body or if you're comfortable with it...you can actually take your index finger and insert it into your vagina and push. You'll feel the base of the tampon when you put your finger in there and you can just push it up a little bit higher.

Narration: Leave the tampon string hanging out of your body, so you can pull it out when it's time to change it.

Becca: Whether or not they're saturated, whether or not there's a little bit of a leak out, where you know that they're completely full, you always want to change it every four to six hours.

Narration: Medical guidelines say never leave a tampon in more than eight hours. It's very, very rare, but some people may develop toxic shock syndrome. That's a bacterial infection caused by leaving a tampon in for too long.

If you develop a high fever, nausea, vomiting or diarrhea, or you feel faint and dizzy, speak with a trusted adult and see a doctor.

But hey, you might not be ready to use tampons yet...and that's okay. It's also okay if you decide that tampons aren't right for you, and you prefer pads or another kind of product.

Becca: Keep in mind with tampons that they are only for period blood. You should never use a tampon for vaginal discharge because vaginal discharge is going to be more thick and mucousy and period blood is going to be more liquid.

Narration: Hold up. Wait a minute. Vaginal discharge??? We've gotta talk about that.

When you think about menstruation, what colors come to mind? Red, right?

During their first year of menstruation, many menstruators notice other colors too. Deep reds, browns, or even almost black sometimes, on the first day of a period. And in between periods, they sometimes notice whites and off-whites on their underwear. The white stuff? That's called vaginal discharge.

Becca: So we talk about vaginal discharge a lot when I'm teaching puberty and maturation to my fourth and fifth graders. And one thing that I really tell my kiddos is...it will come and go with your cycle for the rest of your life.

Narration: We knew it was important to talk about discharge because bleeding is just one part of the whole cycle.

Every month, a menstruator's body gets ready to release an egg from one of their ovaries. It's called ovulation.

Sometimes when people are ovulating, they get vaginal discharge.

Becca: You'll notice during the middle part when you're not having your period kind of almost between periods...It's like egg whites. If you've ever cracked an egg

and not the yellow yolk part, but the outside part, that's kind of what it looks and feels like.

Not that much, I mean it's a tiny amount. But it will be enough that you will either see it on your panties or you will definitely feel it when you wipe after you pee. Um, and you may not see it on your panties, but the first time you wipe it, it's there, you're like, 'Whoa! What is that, what just happened?'

Narration: If you've already started menstruating, you might be thinking, 'What the heck is discharge?' Or you might be thinking, 'That sounds familiar.'

Vaginal discharge is mostly made up of cells, bacteria, mucus, water, maybe also yeast cells. Some people have vaginal discharge daily. Some may only have it when they're ovulating. And some people might not notice it at all.

If you're someone who's almost at the age where you start to menstruate, but haven't started your period, you may notice some vaginal discharge.

Becca: It'll almost be like if you had a blob of glue, like school glue, and it kind of mostly partially dried and you were squeezing it in your fingers and you know, it would, your fingers would stick together and then it would stretch apart. That's kind of what it's going to feel like, that's about the consistency. It's normal to have, it's normal for it to come and go.

Narration: We knew it was important to talk about discharge because bleeding is just one part of the whole cycle. And Nurse Becca says it will look and feel differently throughout your cycle.

So what should you do if you have vaginal discharge? It's fine to check and see what's happening. You can look, you can touch. It's actually good to know what is normal for you and your body.

Becca: Clear and slimy like egg whites? Totally normal. White and sticky, like partially dried glue? Totally normal.

And it might smell. It should not smell awful. [Laughs.] But it might smell different. Right? It's a smell that you're just going to be like, 'Ew, what's that?' But it's not, it's not a smell that's gonna leak through your clothes while you're sitting in class. It's not going to follow you around, that smell. It will be an unusual smell, but it shouldn't be a bad smell.

Narration: Discharge is different for everyone. But we wanted to know the difference between healthy discharge and unhealthy discharge.

Becca: The things that are not normal would be if your discharge is chunky, like cottage cheese. If it's yellow or green, um...like, it's got pus in it...like it looks like what you would blow out of your nose when you're sick. Or if it has a fishy or a foul smell. Like if it really smells, I'm not talking about like, 'Oh it smells a little bit

like butter popcorn,' but I'm talking about, like, 'It smells like rotten fish.' Then you really need to tell a trusted grownup and get to the doctor as soon as possible.

Narration: Also, if there's any itching or burning happening, that's the time to check in with a doctor.

Of course, this episode can't answer all of your questions about menstruation or puberty. But we hope you learned something useful today.

Narration: Feeling My Flo wants to help you start important conversations at critical moments...like when you just want some practical advice about periods!

Special thanks to Anjali Munjal for her help on this episode.

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CITATION

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