



What's a Cyst, Anyway?

Stephanie has been dealing with ovarian cysts since the early years of her period. She opens up about it and about how having a mom who advocates for you and your body changes everything. We also get a doctor's insight on the common condition.

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.

To start this episode, we're going to take a quick trip...all the way to Puerto Rico.

Stephanie Vasquez: Probably some of my favorite memories growing up in Puerto Rico were Sundays in which my mom would have us go to the beach. You bring a cooler full of, like, ice and whatever it is that you're going to eat for the rest of the day, 'cause you stay there until nightfall.

Narration: That's Stephanie Orta Vasquez. Her pronouns are she and her. At the time we spoke, she was at the beginning of some changes in her career.

Stephanie: I am 23 years old. I am an actress. I'm a model. I am...oh my goodness, what am I not? I'm a barista. I am, I'm a teacher. I am anything that is needed for me to survive right now at the moment. [Laughs.]

Narration: When it comes to periods, Stephanie's mom Gladys started talking to her about them early.

Stephanie: I think I'm very lucky because, um, around the age of 10, 11...my mom, she kind of, like, put the seed in of, 'You're going to start changing really soon and it's going to be weird. Um, like, your boobs are going to be hurting, stuff like that...and they were.

Narration: Gladys talked to her about how long a period might last, what products to use and what

they looked like, how Stephanie's body might feel — all the things we talk about on Feeling My Flo.

Gladys helped Stephanie feel really comfortable with her own body and the changes that were coming. So when Stephanie finally did get her period, she felt like she was more than ready.

Stephanie: I didn't get my period, I think, until I was, like, in seventh grade. So maybe 13. It was definitely 7th grade 'cause I remember I was reading Percy Jackson.

For a while, I had been having discharge...so I remember that I went to the bathroom, uh, and it was, like, brown...but I was like, 'Okay, Mom told me, Mom told me that it was going to be, like, brown before, so I'm just going to change right now, even if it's not, like, blood. I'm just going to do it.' And I think that night, that's when, like, I started actually bleeding. It was something that I was definitely ready for and that I know was okay and was not something to be feared.

Narration: When Stephanie got home from school, she immediately told her mom that she had gotten her period.

Stephanie: And then she kinda just looked at me like, 'Hmm, sad,' you know? Like, like... 'You're not a baby.' [Laughs.] It was like, 'I am now a teen, officially.' I think that was, like, my train of thought.

Narration: As a new menstruator, Stephanie felt prepared. She was stocked up with products, information, and a support system. But after a few years of menstruating, her cycle started to change. She started to get these pains.

Stephanie: There was a needle inside of me that was moving every once in a while. Um, and it feels like a specific point, like a...like a little blade in there was, like, creating tiny explosions inside of, like, well, I guess, my uterus.

Narration: Stephanie said she would feel bloated. The pain would come in waves. Her cramps would feel pretty mild for a while, but then she would get sharp pain, seemingly out of nowhere.

Stephanie: And it's so painful that sometimes I'll be fine...like, I'll be having a fine period. But I'll be walking and it'll suddenly flare up and I have to immediately just sit down on the floor.

But there was one time I was 16, I believe...I was hurting so much that my mom thought I had appendicitis. I, I couldn't walk. Like, I was just, I just couldn't — couldn't do anything but be in bed and just cry. And my mom, like, obviously thinking it was appendicitis, she was like, 'Okay, so there is an explanation for this, so let's go to the hospital.'

Narration: At the hospital, they ran some blood tests and a nurse checked in with Stephanie.

Stephanie: I told her specifically where the pain had been. She asked me if I was on my period and I said yes, and she said, 'Then it's very possible that you have ovarian cysts.' But no official tests were ever taken.

Narration: An ovarian cyst is a tiny sac or pocket that sits on or inside of an ovary. Ovaries are where eggs are stored in the childbearing reproductive system. We wanted to know more about what cysts are and where they come from, so our producer Mia Warren reached out to a doctor.

Dr. Patricia Jeudin: My name is Dr. Patricia Jeudin. Um, I am a board-certified obstetrician gynecologist working in Miami. She, her

Narration: An obstetrician is a doctor who specializes in pregnancy and childbirth. A gynecologist is a doctor who specializes in caring for the childbearing reproductive organs...which includes the uterus, vagina, and the ovaries. Dr. Jeudin is both.

Patricia: So an ovarian cyst is sort of like a, a water balloon that grows and develops directly on the ovary. There are different types of cysts. Some may be more, like, solid, so sort of like a rock, and others are more cystic.

Narration: A cyst that's "more cystic" might sound odd. What that means is that it can be more squeezable than a cyst that's a little firmer. And it turns out, ovarian cysts are really common.

The Mayo Clinic is a top medical research organization. According to them, most menstruators will have an ovarian cyst at some point in their lives...especially younger menstruators. The most typical reason that cysts form is if ovaries are working properly. Here's Dr. Jeudin.

Patricia: Generally, most women actually don't have any symptoms. And so, you know, we don't look for them if they don't have any complaints. So if you're having pain that lasts and doesn't go away, that's when we do a little bit of a workup to see if there's a cyst that's present. Sometimes it might be a light cramp and sometimes it can be a strong cramp. In severe cases, it can cause really, really strong pain.

Narration: That strong pain? That's what Stephanie was experiencing. Dr. Jeudin isn't Stephanie's doctor, but she says there are a lot of different reasons an ovarian cyst might cause a person discomfort.

Patricia: As a cyst grows, sometimes it stretches and can cause some pain. The other thing is that the size of the cyst itself, sometimes if it starts to grow pretty big, like about five centimeters, they can actually cause pain. If the cyst pops, like a balloon popping, it can cause pain as well too. And the last thing is that if the weight of the cyst causes the ovary to turn on itself, then that can also cause pain.

Narration: Dr. Jeudin explained that since most menstruators are born with two ovaries, the pain is usually located where the ovaries are...which is the lower abdomen. There's one on each side of the body. The appendix is on the lower right side of the abdomen, which is probably why Stephanie's mom thought the pain she was feeling was appendicitis.

Stephanie left the hospital that day and wasn't in pain any more. The doctor said she probably had a cyst that had burst, and that's why it hurt so much. Stephanie assumed that since the cyst had burst, she wouldn't have to deal with it anymore. But that's not what happened.

Stephanie: Every time my period came along, that's when I knew that that was probably the case that I have ovarian cysts. And there are some cases in which I don't have like, uh, crazy pain...that makes me not be able to walk, but my periods are insanely painful.

Narration: When Stephanie was 18, she moved to New York to start college. After a few years of dealing with extreme pain during her period, it was really starting to affect her life. She would miss birthday parties, outings with friends, and sometimes she couldn't even go to class.

A few years later, her mom came to visit from Puerto Rico, and she went with Stephanie to the gynecologist. Just like when Stephanie was younger, Gladys helped her daughter feel comfortable talking about her body.

Stephanie: I was there and my mom immediately mentioned...it was like, 'She has ovarian cysts. can we talk about this for a second?' And we explained to the doctor this whole thing that I've been saying. Now that I'm 23, the doctor agreed. She was, she said, 'Yeah, you probably have ovarian cysts.'

Narration: At this point, Stephanie had also started taking birth control pills as a way to help manage her period. Dr. Jeudin says that's a pretty common way to handle period pain.

Patricia: So the birth control pills actually help stop ovulation. So, the main function of birth control pills is basically to prevent someone from getting pregnant. The way you get pregnant is when that egg is released. And so what birth control often does, it stops that process from happening...theoretically, if that process does not happen, then the cyst is less likely to form.

Narration: For a person who menstruates, pain in the uterus can mean a lot of different things. The first step in figuring out what's going on is to see a gynecologist and tell them what you're feeling.

Patricia: But there are other things that can cause pain, things that are related to the pelvis and things that are not so much related to the gynecological organs. And so, um, sometimes we don't find a reason from a GYN standpoint and you have to do a little bit more of a workup.

Narration: To learn more about what was going on in her body, Stephanie had an ultrasound. An

ultrasound is similar to an x-ray, but it uses sound waves to create images of the organs inside your body. Stephanie's doctor didn't find any cysts then.

Even though the medical tests didn't help her the way she expected, Stephanie has found a way to deal with her period that works for her. The birth control pills she's taking stops her ovulation. Like Dr. Jeudin mentioned, without ovulation, there often isn't a period at all.

Stephanie: As much as I can, I skip it. But when I know that I'm running low, or it really depends, I kind of just decide on, like, what the plans are going to be for the next few weeks. And then I'm like, 'Should I just have my period and then start it again?'

Narration: Not everyone that has ovarian cysts will deal with the kind of pain that Stephanie experiences. Again, cysts are super common and a lot of people don't even notice if they have them. For someone that is experiencing pain, there are ways to deal with them other than birth control. Here's Dr. Jeudin.

Patricia: So whenever you have the pain, you write down when you have the pain, how strong it is. We usually do a scale of one to 10. The other thing to keep note of is when you had your period, the first day of your period and write the pain that you're having when you're having your period and if you're having pain aside from your period, write it on the day that you are having it, um, in relation to your period.

Narration: Keeping track of your period and what you're feeling is really important in understanding more about your body. I track my period and I even track all my symptoms and my moods throughout my cycle.

Stephanie's only been on birth control for a couple of months, so she's still figuring out what works for her and her body. And that's fine. Everyone's period is different. It's all a learning experience.

Narration: Feeling My Flo wants to help you start important conversations at critical moments...like when you want to know more about what your body is doing...and why.

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Feeling My Flo's executive producer is Mia Warren. This episode was produced by me, with help from Mia. It was mixed by Kojin Tashiro. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. I'm Kamilah Kashanie.



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