

# Menstruation in the field

Maddie Zuercher  
UCLA EcoEvoPub - 8 April



INFORMED!

HEALTHY!

PREPARED!

SAFE!

CONFIDENT!

COMFORTABLE!

Many field research trips and jobs involve long stretches in isolated areas without restroom access. These circumstances can make menstruation in the field quite complicated even without a plethora of existing stigmas, misinformation, and inequities. This issue is rarely addressed specifically to field researchers; periods are often treated as a personal issue and thus not clearly, openly discussed like any other health concerns. While Wikihow and REI articles such as “Girl Talk: How to Handle Your Period in the Backcountry” are helpful to some, our community needs to thoroughly address menstruation in the field. Menstrual products must be included in first-aid kits and information must be distributed to all members of the research team. Menstruators can benefit from learning about products and Leave-No-Trace friendly methods of menstrual waste disposal. I also encourage non-menstruators to join this discussion and learn how to support their field teams. By increasing awareness and preparing for menstruation, we can improve the health, wellbeing, and confidence of menstruators in the field. [If you have questions or concerns you'd like addressed, please send them to [mezuercher@g.ucla.edu](mailto:mezuercher@g.ucla.edu) by Thursday.]

**Abstract**



**RealScientists | Victoria**  
@realscientists

When I was young and trying so hard to be tough during fieldwork, I didn't want to give the guys a reason to think I wasn't good enough

**RealScientists | Linda** @realscientists · Jan 30, 2016

On a collecting expedition in Australia I was referred to as a 'bird' by park staff.



**Imogene Cancellare** ✓ @biologistimo · Jan 30, 2016

Replying to @biologistimo

@tabinfl @realscientists OH, and I got called a "vagina biologist" and clucked at like I was a chicken.

**RealScientists | Linda** @realscientists · Jan 30, 2016

I considered getting an IUD for my PhD fieldwork. But \$700, uni health center wouldn't do it, and Planned Parenthood only open 2 days/week

**RealScientists | Linda** @realscientists · Jan 30, 2016

Replying to @realscientists

I knew someone in Serengeti who would stuff used TP/ tampons down the holes in termite mounds. I felt sorry for the occupants of the TM



**RealScientists | Victoria** @realscientists

A lot of the fieldwork I did when young was mostly with all male crews. I put a lot of pressure on myself to fit in.

**RealScientists | Linda** @realscientists · Jan 30, 2016

Clean tampons are one thing, but having to deal with/ hide used tampons can be another level of stress

**RealScientists | Linda** @realscientists · Jan 30, 2016

<---trying to imagine boiling the moon cup over the communal camp stove and explaining it to my male crew members



**Dr Niki Rust** 🌱 @NikiRust · Jan 30, 2016

@afewbugs @realscientists @justinehud Agreed, love the mooncup, but yes trying to find somewhere private to boil it each month can be tough!



**Alessondra Springmann**  
@sondy

Replying to @realscientists

@realscientists @afewbugs @justinehud just pee on the diva cup. No need to wash with water or sanitizer.

1:20 pm · 30 Jan 2016 · Twitter for iPhone



**RealScientists | Linda** @realscientists · 30 Jan 2016

Replying to @sondy

@sondy @afewbugs @justinehud Wait what? I am not peeing on a diva cup and reinserting it without washing it



1



2



**Alessondra Springmann** @sondy · 30 Jan 2016

@realscientists @afewbugs @justinehud urine is sterile. Worked for me in Ghana!

Establishing hygienic conditions  
+  
Maintaining privacy and discretion  
+  
Limited or rationed supplies (water, soap, medications)  
↓  
**Improve menstrual health**

Primarily word-of-mouth communication  
+  
Compounding issues (PCOS, endometriosis)  
+  
Poorer health care for transgender, nonbinary, and/or intersex scientists  
↓  
**Remove inequities in menstrual health**

Fear of harassment or prejudice  
+  
Social perceptions (culture of toughness)  
+  
Inconvenient timing and symptoms that limit activity  
↓  
**Culturally correct existing stigmas**

↓  
**Improve health, wellbeing, communication, safety, confidence**



Kenny Jones fronting a period campaign.  
*Feminism in India.*



Bethan Davies - bump at 18.5 weeks.  
*Antarctic Glaciers*



Mary Cain celebrates as she wins the women's 1-mile run finals when she was 16 in 2013. *Insider*

**Not all menstruators are women  
& not all women menstruate.**



# What are safe ways to menstruate in the field?

Will there be access to private facilities?  
Clean water? Laundry? Stores?

## Disposable pads

- Different sizes/types
- Disposable
- No experience necessary
- Easy to find in stores
- May limit physical movement

*Always, Kotex*

## Reusable pads

- Different sizes/types
- Reusable, washable
- No experience necessary
- May limit physical movement
- Finite quantity needed

*Rael, Thinx, TomboyX*

## Menstrual cups

- Different sizes/types
- Reusable, needs cleaning
- Finite quantity needed
- Good to use under water (no blood exits body)

*Diva cup, Flex cup*

## Tampons

- Different sizes/types
- Disposable
- Easy to find in stores
- Good to use under water (no blood exits body)
- Requires particular schedule for changing

*Tampax, Playtex*

# How do I dispose of menstrual waste and Leave No Trace?

Menstrual cups: boiled water or wipes, dig a cathole (6" down, 200 ft from water)



Tampons: remove and seal using the 'glove trick'



Disposable waste: pack out in sealed, bear-proof container

## Also consider packing:

Hot water, soap, wipes for cleaning reusable products and washing hands



Iron supplements, vitamins

Opaque waste bags



Medications to manage pain, bloat, diarrhea, constipation, UTI, PCOS, endometriosis, yeast infections





# Does menstruation hinder fieldwork?

- Blood loss
- Fatigue, headache
- Abdominal pain
- Bloating, nausea
- Diarrhea or constipation



There is anecdotal evidence (though no studies) that people feel weaker during menses or while on hormonal medication.



If your field work is affected by your period, speak up! This is a **field safety and accessibility issue**.



However, this is not true for everyone all the time. This information should not be used as justification to treat menstruators differently in the field.

## **If your period hinders your ability to do fieldwork:**

Be firm about what you cannot do

Emphasize what you can do

For clarity, avoid using euphemisms

Update your team when you feel well

## **If a team member expresses that their work is affected:**

Treat the information with discretion

Do not make assumptions about the person's future abilities

Treat the situation just like any other medical situation (asthma, allergy, migraine)

Hey, I'm feeling unwell today from cramping. I won't be able to set up the equipment tonight, but I'm happy to work on data entry. I'd appreciate it if you kept this between us.



No worries, thanks for letting me know. I hope you feel better soon. Let me know when you're ready to work with the trapping team again.



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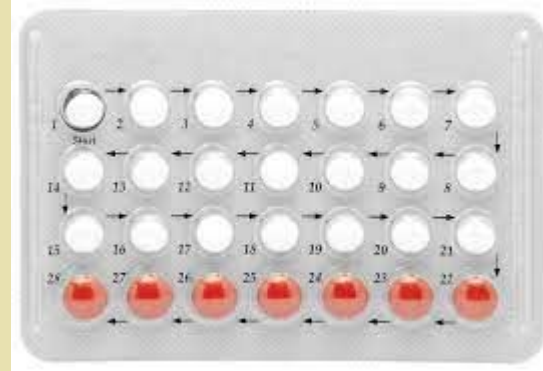
mptions about the  
ilities  
n just like any other  
(asthma, allergy,

# Can I avoid menstruating in the field?

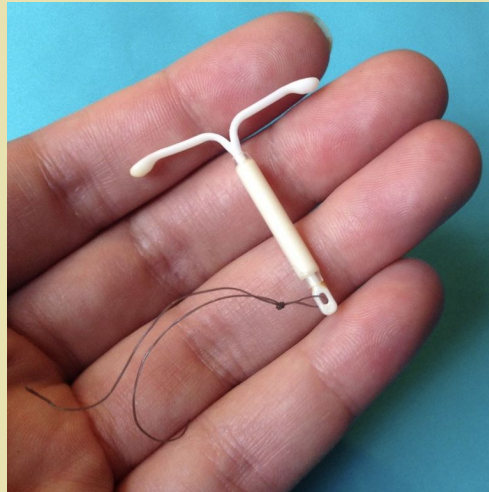
Talk to your doctor

Methods are not guaranteed so bring supplies

Try *before* going to the field, symptoms may arise



**FREE with UC SHIP**





# How can I provide resources for menstruators?

Include menstrual supplies in your field safety plans and first-aid kits

- Products: cups, pads, tampons, liners, underwear
- Sanitation: soap, wipes, plastic bags, gloves
- Medication: painkillers, iron supplements



Discuss options ahead of time: make resources known and allow input

- Avoid singling out any specific researchers
- Recognize that any one of your researchers may or may not menstruate

# Is it ok to ask if someone is/will be menstruating?

They may not know

They may not feel comfortable sharing

Why do you need to know?

Will knowing this change what you do, how you treat them, or how you prepare?

To Whole research team

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Field safety plan and first-aid kit info

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Hi all,

I have attached our field safety plan and first-aid kit info here. If you have questions or would like to request specific supplies (eg medications, menstrual products, emergency equipment), please let me know.

## Ok... then how do I address it?

Create comprehensive first-aid kits and field safety plans that include menstruation

Notify whole research team of your field safety plan and first-aid kits

Ask for input and specific requests for items

Participant Information	
<b>Field Team/ Participants</b>	<p>Is anyone working alone? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No If yes, develop a communications plan with strict check-in procedures; if cell coverage is unreliable, carry a satellite communication device or personal locator beacon.</p> <p>Primary Field Team Leader: <i>Name, phone number</i></p> <p>Secondary Field Team Leader: <i>Name, phone number</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Field Team/Participant list is attached as training documentation</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other attachment: e.g. course roster</p>
<b>Physical Demands</b>	<i>List any physical demands required for this trip and training/certification provided. e.g. diving, swimming, hiking, climbing, high altitudes, respirators, heights, confined or restricted spaces, etc. (consult with EH&amp;S regarding appropriate training &amp; documentation).</i>
<b>Mental Demands</b>	<i>List any unique mental demands required for this trip, e.g. long travel days, high stress environments, different cultural norms, etc.</i>
<b>First Aid Training &amp; Supplies</b>	<p>Cal/OSHA requires at least one trained person (with current certification) for work at remote sites. CPR also recommended.</p> <p><i>List team members trained in first aid and the type of training received.</i></p> <p>Location and description of group medical/first aid kit: <i>Who is carrying it, where is it stored. Brief description of contents.</i></p> <p>Location of Epi-pen(s): <i>Where is it stored, who is trained to assist or administer?</i></p>
<b>Immunizations or Medical Evaluation</b>	<p><i>List required immunizations/prophylaxis or required medical evaluation, if applicable.</i></p> <p>For required or recommended immunizations and medical clearance related to your research protocol, contact the Occupational Health Clinic at 310-825-6771 (e.g. handling bats, working at altitude, respirators, etc.)</p>

Page 2/5 of the UCLA Field Safety Plan template

“Menstrual pads, tampons, wipes, and ibuprofen in kit, which is stored in the cabin restroom.”

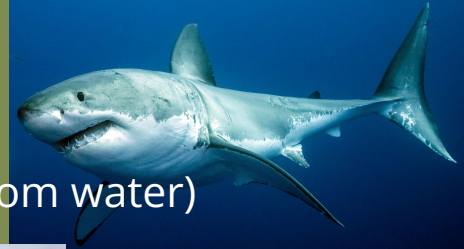




# FAQ

Does your period affect wildlife?

- Only anecdotal evidence, no true evidence
- Recommended to pee in a cathole (6" down, 200 ft from water)



sweet smelling substances.

- Women should stay out of bear country during their menstrual period.



## RESPONSES OF POLAR BEARS TO HUMAN MENSTRUAL ODORS

BRUCE S. CUSHING,<sup>1</sup> Wildlife Biology Program, University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812

## REACTIONS OF BLACK BEARS TO HUMAN MENSTRUAL ODORS

LYNN L. ROGERS, U.S. Forest Service, North Central Forest Experiment Station, SR 1, Box 7200, Ely, MN 55731  
GREGORY A. WILKER, U.S. Forest Service, North Central Forest Experiment Station, SR 1, Box 7200, Ely, MN 55731  
SALLY S. SCOTT, U.S. Forest Service, North Central Forest Experiment Station, SR 1, Box 7200, Ely, MN 55731



**ODORS ATTRACT BEARS**

- Pack your garbage. Make sure items such as empty food containers are closed and odor free.
- When camping, use fresh-scented food instead of fresh food.
- Store food in plastic bags out of reach of bears and well away from sleeping areas.
- Sleep in tents or trailers. Do not sleep in tents.
- Don't sleep in the same clothes you wore when cooking.
- Keep sleeping bags and personal gear clean and free of food odors.
- Cook with gasoline or liquid petroleum fuels instead of making campfires.
- Don't use perfumes, deodorants, and suntan lotions or sprays.
- Women should stay out of bear country during their menstrual period.
- Personal cleanliness is good insurance.
- Minimize sexual activity at bear camps.

# FAQ

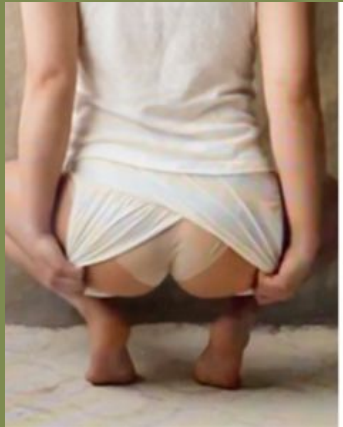
Does your period affect wildlife?

- For some animals, there is evidence that they are
- Recommended to pee in a cathole (6" down, 200



I need to stay hydrated but peeing is annoying...

- She Wee, Go Girl, gallon bags
- Pants with zippers



# FAQ

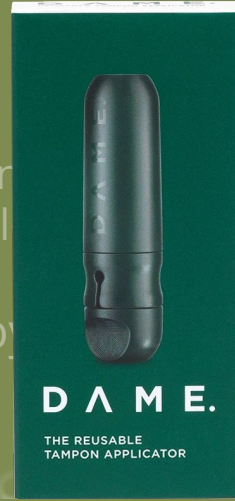


wildlife?

is evident

in a cathol

g is anno



are affecte

200 ft from



I need to

- She
- Pant

Which products should I pack if we need to save space?

- Reusable products OR thin / less-packaged pads and tampons
- Ask your team for input, only pack what they might use





## FAQ

Does your period affect wildlife?

- For some animals, there is evidence that they are affected!



How do you manage your flow during strenuous physical activity?

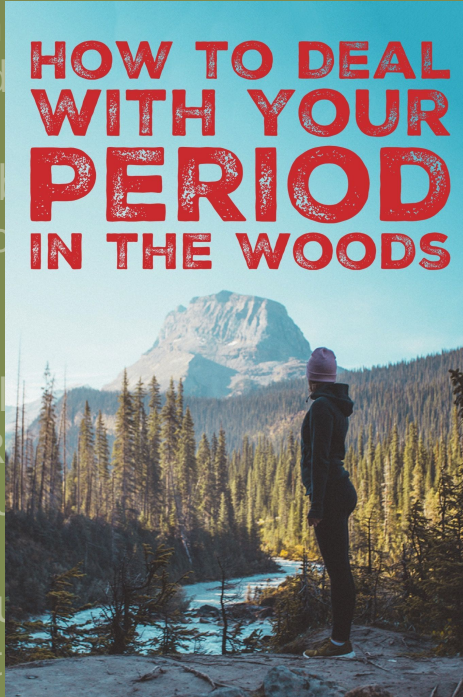
- Double up on products, painkillers and diet may help



## FAQ

Does your period affect wildlife?

- For some animals
- Recommendations



that they are affected!  
5" down, 200 ft from water)



ous physical activity?  
ay help

How do I look up more info on my own?

- Blogs! Articles! Search for thru hiking and backpacking on your period

- If you may menstruate, do research ahead of time to figure out the best way for you to manage menstruation on this trip.
- It is the responsibility of the field leader to ask for input, provide resources, and communicate about menstruation to make the field safe and accessible for all.



@thedivacup

# Thanks to everyone who shared with me!

[Becker, R. \(2016\). Fighting the menstruation taboo in the field. Nature News.](#)

["It Shouldn't Be at All Surprising": A Link Between Birth Control and Performance? \(Faster Skier\)](#)

[Menstrual hygiene matters \(WaterAid\)](#)

[Doing fieldwork as a female \(Jocelyne Sze\)](#)

[Periods + Fieldwork \(thebrainscoop on Youtube\)](#)

[Getting your period while on the field \(The Life of Science\)](#)

[Some Men Menstruate Too. Can We Talk About It Now? \(Feminism in India\)](#)

[Transgender menstruation: the men who have periods and the women who don't \(South China Morning Post\)](#)

[A guide to juggling fieldwork and pregnancy \(Nature\)](#)

[FAQ for female backpackers \(Andrew Skurka\)](#)

[Bears and Menstruating Women \(National Park Service\)](#)

[No, menstrual blood does not attract sharks \(Popular Science\)](#)

[For transgender men, pain of menstruation is more than just physical \(NBC News\)](#)

[Retired Olympian reshaping conversation around athletes' periods \(Kyodo News\)](#)

[The Pregnant Field Scientist \(Antarctic Glaciers\)](#)

[Periods and Fieldwork \(Field Museum\)](#)

[Leave No Trace Skill Series: Feminine Hygiene – How To Deal With Your Period While Camping](#)

[Period Real Talk: A Thru-Hiker's View \(Project Untaboo\)](#)

[How to Handle Your Period While Hiking and Camping \(Outside\)](#)

Cushing, B. S. (1983). Responses of polar bears to human menstrual odors. Bears: Their Biology and Management, 270-274.

Rogers, L. L., Wilker, G. A., & Scott, S. S. (1991). Reactions of black bears to human menstrual odors. The Journal of wildlife management, 632-634.

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