

Menarche: A Woman's Coming of Age

First in a 3 part series on Woman's Life Cycle

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Coming of Age

Imagine you are a woman living a life in perfect harmony with Mother Nature's eternal rhythms. You rise each morning with the sun and end your day at sunset when the day's light is gone. At night you sleep by moonlight, or by starlight when the moon is dark. Your diet consists of the fresh foods found around you through the changing seasons.

In this natural environment, one for which our bodies have adapted over many generations, a woman's cycles flow together with Mother Nature's. For just as the moon pulls the ocean's water into tides, so it tugs at the water in every cell of our bodies. As her light waxes she draws out our eggs in preparation for ovulation. If the egg is not fertilized, as she wanes she signals our bodies to let it go with our menstrual flow in order to begin again with the new moon.

Because of this lunar influence, women who live together in a natural environment tend to cycle together, ovulating at the full moon and menstruating at the new. Women living together in close family and tribal units influence each other's hormonal balance through pheromones, potent chemical messages that help to further synchronize their fertility cycles.

Women, the archetypal nurturers of society, traditionally honor their fertility by spending several days each month in moon huts, where they slow down and turn their nurturing inward toward themselves, renewing their spirits. The menstruating woman is seen as a mysterious and sacred being, because she experiences bleeding without any injury.

A young maiden's coming of age into her fertile womanhood is honored and celebrated with reverence in many traditional societies. Her menarche, the beginning of menstruation may be marked by initiation rites such as ritual baths and a vision quest. She is formally welcomed into the moon lodge by her female relatives and friends. Her dreams at this time are believed to reveal her true path in life.

Contrast this image with the experience many of our adolescent girls face today while coming of age. Our daughters' sleep and waking cycles are often controlled by the demands of arbitrary work and school schedules. Our houses and city streets are typically illuminated night and day by artificial electric lighting. Many of us have become so disconnected from natural rhythms that we may even go through the month without any idea of the moon's phase. We may often feed

our children foods grown in faraway climates that bear no relation to our own environment's seasons.

We live in a society that has created strong taboos surrounding menstruation. Our culture tends to ignore the entire process, pretending that the profound changes our bodies and souls are going through simply aren't happening. Many of us are unprepared for menarche, and experience this wonderful blessing as a fearful and shameful curse.

No wonder menstrual imbalances such as premenstrual syndrome, painful periods, irregular bleeding and infertility are so prevalent today. Our daughters face so many levels of biologic dissociation from the natural rhythms of fertility for which we are designed.

For example, our pineal glands secrete melatonin and other hormonal releasing factors that control our bodies' daily and monthly biorhythms in response to our changing exposure to sun and moon light. Artificial lighting, which most of us experience every night, can also disrupt these cycles. Erratic sleep and waking patterns can further confuse the body's natural rhythms. A diet high in hormones and a variety of other artificial substances found in commercially grown foods can also disrupt the natural flow of a woman's fertility cycle.

Adolescence today is an often awkward and confusing time. Our daughters will greatly benefit if we help them understand and cherish the changes that are unfolding within their bodies as they awaken into fertile, sexually mature women. They need to know that their intense mood swings, sexual curiosity, infatuations and fantasies are normal parts of their emotional and spiritual growth. The best way for us to ease their transition into womanhood is by providing clear information and sharing our awe and appreciation of their bodies' miraculous processes.

It's time for mothers, grandmothers, sisters and aunts to reclaim this rite of passage for our daughters and nieces, and for all the girls in our society. Many are reviving coming of age ceremonies in which the young girl's passage into womanhood is celebrated with her closest friends and relatives, who honor her by showering her with blessings, wishes, hopes and dreams.

Physiology of Menarche

Even though the most dramatic event marking a girl's puberty is her first menstrual period, the process actually unfolds over a number of years. The earliest physical signs of puberty starts three or four years before the onset of menses, beginning with rapid growth of the girl's hands and feet. Next, her breasts begin developing, her hips widen and pubic and underarm hair appears and thickens.

By an average age of twelve (though there is a wide variation of normal) the girl's pituitary gland begins producing a variety of hormones including FSH (follicle stimulating hormone) and LH (lutening hormone) that stimulate her ovaries to secrete high levels of estrogen and

progesterone. These are a woman's principle sex and fertility hormones. They stimulate the ovaries to ovulate, in other words, to release an egg each month. At the same time, they prepare the lining of the uterus, called the endometrium to receive a fertilized egg. If the egg is not fertilized, it's flushed from the body along with the uterine lining during menstruation two weeks later.

During the first few years of menstruation, most girls' ovaries are just getting used to this monthly cycle of preparing and releasing an egg, and the process doesn't always happen smoothly. Sometimes the endometrium builds up, but no egg is released. These anovulatory cycles may result in heavier bleeding and uterine cramping even in healthy young women.

Stress and poor diet can also disturb the hormonal balance, causing irregular menstruation. An average of about 22% body fat is necessary to sustain normal periods, which is why some athletes or girls with eating disorders can often miss periods, or even lose them altogether.

This frightening occurrence can usually be reversed by uncovering the root cause of the problem and making appropriate modifications in the girl's diet, exercise and stress management skills. It's best for most adolescent girls to eat a diet high in a variety of fresh organic fruits and vegetables and whole grains. It's also important to choose high quality protein foods such as nuts, seeds, beans and, if desired, organic dairy products, eggs, fish and lean meats. Try to minimize consumption of caffeine, alcohol, soda pop and junk foods, and remember to drink 8 glasses of pure water every day.

Menarche, the beginning of a girl's adulthood, is an ideal opportunity for her elders to encourage healthy habits that will set her on a course of vigor and vitality for many years to come. Girls who exercise in moderation, eat calcium rich foods and who don't smoke greatly increase their chance of growing old with strong and healthy bones.

Coming-of-age herbal remedies:

The herbs most helpful for young women at the time of menarche are those that tone the uterus and support the liver and endocrine (hormonal balancing) systems. When these systems function optimally, the physical, emotional and spiritual upheavals of puberty will be eased.

Raspberry leaf (*Rubus idaeus*) is an all-around excellent woman's herb. It is mild, tasty and contains fragarine, an alkaloid which tones and relaxes the uterine muscles. It is rich in vitamins B, C and E, and mineral such as calcium, iron, phosphorus and potassium. Raspberry leaf tea is used to elevate the mood and ease premenstrual syndrome.

Stinging nettle leaf (*Urtica dioica*) is a wonderful liver, kidney and adrenal tonic. Nettles are rich in easily absorbable minerals such as iron and calcium and almost every essential trace mineral known. Their diuretic (kidney stimulating) effect helps the body get rid of excess water and reduces bloating, easing premenstrual bloating and breast tenderness. Their high vitamin K

content helps control heavy bleeding, and the easily digestible iron is used to prevent and treat anemia. Infusing nettles makes a brilliant emerald green tea that is quite beautiful and powerful.

Partridge Berry, formerly called Squawvine (*Mitchella repens*) and Cramp Bark (*Viburnum opulus*) are both Native American herbal remedies that have been used for centuries to relieve painful periods. Cramp bark contains valerianic acid, a relaxant which specifically acts on the uterus. They may be combined and drunk as a tea throughout the menstrual period, or can be absorbed through the soles of the feet in a comforting foot bath.

Dandelion root and leaf (*Taraxacum officinale*) helps to keep fluids flowing freely by stimulating the kidneys and by cleansing and flushing toxins through the liver. It's excellent for premenstrual bloating and breast tenderness, and also can help clear up teen acne. It's rich in Vitamins C, A, iron, calcium and potassium. Dandelions are best prepared as a tea, or the young greens may be steamed or eaten in salad. Remember, don't spray your weeds, eat them!

Yellow dock root (*Rumex crispus*) is extremely high in easily digestible iron, helpful for girls with heavy periods who tend to be anemic. It also is an important "blood purifying" liver tonic herb.

Dong quai (*Angelica sinensis*), an herb with a long history of use in traditional Chinese medicine, is a tonic herb which strengthens the liver and endocrine system, which in turn tones the uterus and reproductive organs. It is very effective for premenstrual symptoms, but should not be taken during menstruation as it may increase bleeding.

What a difference we can make for our daughters if we embrace and celebrate them as they reach menarche. Let's all help our daughters connect with and be comfortable with the eternal life forces flowing through their bodies that enable them to become powerful and fertile women.

This overview is presented for educational purposes only. For herbal advice regarding specific health conditions please consult a qualified health care professional.

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