How can I cope with my periods on a long shift?

Working many hours while menstruating can be tough, Abi Rimmer hears, but there are some things you can do to make it a bit easier.

“Imagine this: it’s the 11th hour of a busy shift. Whenever you start reading the notes of the next patient, you’re pulled away to some more urgent task. You’ve barely had time to gather your thoughts, never mind change your tampon.”

“For me, the days of squeezing tampons and pads into pockets already overflowing with pens, job lists, and snacks are over. In my pre-cup days, I remember once starting my period unexpectedly at work and discovering that the hospital shop didn’t sell menstrual products. I ended up sneaking a pad from their supplies when they most needed them. A free menstrual supplies box would’ve saved time and stress.

“So, how to manage periods on long shifts? I suggest finding products that suit you, including exploring cups and reusable pads or pants. Placing boxes with spare supplies in bathrooms or changing rooms undoubtedly helps anyone caught short.”

“I think there are two ways to think about how periods should be managed during a long shift: how they can be managed by the person experiencing them, and how organisations should help people manage what’s a completely normal event.

“The tricky thing about periods is they can be unpredictable in both timing and in heaviness, making it easy to be caught out. If they work for you, Mirena IUDs are brilliant, as they can pretty much abolish your periods. The combined or progesterone-only pill can make your periods more predictable and less heavy. You can use a menstrual cup if you think your period might be on its way, and they have the advantage of being reusable and eco-friendly.

“Having timely access to period products can be challenging. It’s clear that many doctors in training don’t have access to lockers or other storage space for period products, and even if they do they may find themselves at the opposite end of the hospital from their supplies when they most need them.

“Legislation was passed in the Scottish parliament last year to make sure that period products are made available without cost for anyone who needs them, and several Scottish health boards have committed to making period products available in staff toilets. This kind of organisational commitment is what’s needed to make periods easier to manage, and I think it’s a pretty fundamental wellbeing issue that needs to be addressed, now. We provide loo roll to all healthcare workers—why not period products?”

“There are short and long term ways to approach managing periods during long shifts. Shorter term approaches, depending on the individual, could be wearing two or three types of period products, such as a tampon or menstrual cup, winged sanitary pads—which are less likely to dislodge—period pants, or soft leggings under bottoms to reduce bleed-through. Incontinence pants provide protection, but you should find a comfortable brand that doesn’t rustle. “Expect the unexpected: keep a range of products

“Providing longer term solutions for better menstruation based workplace experiences is key to enabling all to thrive and not just to cope. Making a variety of period products available in all clinical areas, normalising breaks without the need for justification, introducing dark coloured scrubs universally, and offering ‘period leave’ days could improve wellbeing during menstruation. We each have a potentially powerful part to play—regardless of whether we menstruate—to realise this for ourselves and our menstruating colleagues.”

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