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

Working long hours during your period can be tough, **Abi Rimmer** hears, but there are some things you can do to make it a bit easier

Abi Rimmer

Sarah Levy

GP trainee

“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.

“Using a menstrual cup has revolutionised my periods, particularly when I’m working. My cup boasts that it holds the same as 3-4 tampons, and it can be used for up to 12 hours. Washable period pants and pads have also proved very useful, reducing the chafing and wedgies often encountered in an active job.

“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 the supplies for patients. A free menstrual supplies box would’ve saved time and stress.

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

“Being open with our colleagues about menstruation can increase camaraderie and make us feel more comfortable asking when we need a spare pad or sharing tasks if our period is making us struggle at work that day. Importantly, let’s work towards a culture where we have adequate breaks, to facilitate period management in addition to general staff wellbeing and patient safety.”

Rosie Baruah

Consultant in intensive care medicine, Western General Hospital

“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?”

Josie Cheetham

Deputy chair, BMA Wales Junior Doctors Committee

“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 absorbencies and products in your bag, locker, or desk, alongside painkillers, non-diuretic drinks, and food. Find snack bars for ‘period hunger’ that travel well when compressed in pockets. Discuss practical strategies for pain and nausea management with your own doctor. And practise self-compassion: advocate for and take breaks when needed, as you’re role modelling the change we all need. Some use intrauterine systems, but if you choose this do it for your own reasons.

“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.”