

The Blind Girls' Guide to Puberty

Emma-Mae Schmidt© 2019



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Foreword

I have been totally blind since birth, and am studying at the University of Melbourne.

I decided to write this because I feel that subjects such as puberty and menstruation are still not commonly talked about today, especially within the blind community.

Although I was very well educated in this area, I didn't quite know what to expect until the time came. Having said that, my development into womanhood was an interesting and overall enjoyable process; one of the best times of my life, and I believe that if possible, other girls should be able to find this process just as enjoyable and as stress-free as possible. I hope that all who read this find it useful.

Emma-Mae



Introduction

I can remember back in about grade 5 or so, sitting in preparation for puberty sessions, feeling a little out of the loop as about 20 girls looked in fascination at pictures of the female reproductive system. 'But what does it look like? I mean, what does it really feel like?' I can remember asking myself. My mother and school nurse were very good on the whole at educating me about what would happen to me and about the re-productive system: the period; the uterus etc. But not having the benefit of external reproductive organs as males do, I could never really know what it was like. I'm writing this for you, not ultimately to give the usual lecture about growing up and what will happen to you; I hope that you have females you trust who will no doubt deprive me of the pleasure (mothers, aunts, school nurses, etc.), but I do want to write about it from a blind person's perspective. I want to give you some insight into what it might feel like, and the shapes of your reproductive organs. I'm no expert, but I did feel a little deprived as to what to expect. Before you read on, it is very, very important to know a few things:

1. It is completely natural, and very important to get to know your body. Examine yourself when you shower, as you dress/undress. It also means you will be able to notice changes in yourself and your body as they occur.
2. Things really aren't as bad as they seem! This book is intended to be quite open. I'm writing about things that happen to every female as she grows, but I don't write these details to worry you; on the contrary. If you're unsure about anything, ask someone you trust.
3. No experience is the same. I can give some detail about what to expect, but you never can really know what to expect, for you. Your experience of growing and developing won't necessarily be the same as your mum's; your sister's; your best friend's.

A look inside

Let's start by taking a look at the female reproductive system. Unlike with males, most of a woman's reproductive organs are too far inside for you to reach them. Your uterus is where the baby grows, and it's the lining of this that comes away when you have your period. The lining grows back between one menstrual cycle and another. When a fertile egg is in the uterus, the lining does not come away. Hence, a female's period stops when she becomes pregnant. This is also why you lose some eggs when you ovulate, about a week after your period (you will lose eggs from one ovary at a time with each cycle). The uterus is shaped a bit like a pear. On each side of it are your ovaries. These are egg shaped, coincidentally, as this is where your eggs are stored. Hovering over each ovary is a fallopian tube, down which eggs travel towards your uterus. These are shaped rather like an open umbrella. I found out how these feel by looking at a life doll. Life dolls are life-sized male and female dolls/bodies which include detachable reproductive organs, so you can examine them properly. I strongly encourage you to look at a life doll in order to give you a close to lifelike impression of the reproductive system. I obtained access to these at the time from Vision Australia, and schools could also access them.

Breasts and bras

One of the first signs of puberty is breast development. This is when you will need to learn how to put on a bra, however, this can be practised before you develop breasts. You will very likely need to start by wearing training bras. These are bras which do not yet have cups, because they are made for girls who do not yet have breasts, but have buds, as you will have in the beginning of your breast development.

This is how you wear a bra:

Looking at the back of the bra (if the bra is done up), opposite the cup, you will notice a strap. This passes round your back and has two components called the hook and eye. As you put the bra on, the hook will be in your right hand, and the eye in your left. This is also how you can tell the bra isn't inside out.

Put your arms through the shoulder straps and line up the cups of the bra so they cover the entirety of both your breasts. Once your breasts have developed further, you may need to lean forward, and shake and manoeuvre your breasts until the whole of each breast fits into each cup.

Pass the bra strap around your back. Holding the hook in your right hand and the eye in the other, stretch the halves of the strap across your back until the right half has stretched slightly to the left of the eye. When you have done this, slowly release the hook until it clicks into place. This may take several attempts whilst you are learning.

Here are a few important things to note:

- Most training bras have only one hook and eye. However, once you start wearing actual bras, these have two, sometimes three hooks and eyes to ensure a tighter fit and more breast support. You will need to make sure that all hooks and eyes have been done up properly, and that each hook has clipped into its corresponding eye.
- Once your breasts are growing it is important to have a bra fitting. These can be done in lingerie shops. This is to ensure you purchase the correct bra size (10, 12, etc. – this corresponds with your clothing size) and cup size (B, C, D etc.). It is important to have a bra fitting so that your breasts are properly supported, ensuring that they don't sag. During a bra fitting, a woman will give you several bra sizes to try on and is likely to use a measuring tape to measure your size. A fitting may involve some touching of your body in order to measure and fit you properly. This is normal and necessary for obtaining an appropriate size.

I See Red

Now for the all-important subject of menstruating (having your period). I'm sure you've been told that you will bleed from your vagina. 'How?' I remember asking myself. I expected a huge flood of blood. 'What if I'm out? What if everyone can see? Will it soak everything I'm wearing? Will it be really sudden? What if I haven't practiced wearing pads yet?' (More on pads later, by the way). Well never fear – it's not like that. We bleed about a cup full of blood. It sounds a lot, but it isn't really, considering we bleed for around 7-10 days. (Again, remember this is different for every female). In case any of my readers think like me, don't worry – there will be no volcanic eruption of blood. This, in any case, would mean you'd lose far too much blood. Some of you may have one, some or all of the following warning signs:

Discharge.

This is when a thick, slippery liquid comes out of your vagina. This is generally the sign that liquid of a more red and sticky kind might make its presence known soon. However, discharge can occur in other situations as well: if it's a hot day and you sweat, or perhaps if you have been sitting in one position for a long period of time. Generally though, there will be more of it just before your period.

Spotting.

This is when you have tiny spots of blood coming out of your vagina – generally a sign that more is to come. You might feel it in your knickers. If you have spotting, or even a little more and you aren't sure if it is blood or discharge, you can have a feel or smell. It is also a good idea to have a sighted person double check; someone such as your mother, school nurse or female relative. If you think your period has stopped, it would be wise to keep wearing pads for a couple of days afterwards as well, just in case you also have some spotting as your bleeding stops.

Period pain

This is definitely different for each person. Some girls have no pain at all, while others do experience considerable pain. Sometimes it's just a gentle niggling down below, and feels a bit like you've been standing up for too long. If the pain grows a little, it may feel as though somebody's gently pulling or stretching your pelvic area (from about your hips downwards). I hope, for your sake, that if you do have period pain it doesn't get worse than this.

Ouch!

If your period pain is more than mild, walking, stretching and exercise does help once you get out and about. Generally, if you're in this situation, you may not feel like exercising. Something small to eat generally helps (perhaps a piece of toast), as well as a hot bath, a heat pack or a hot water bottle along with some Panadol. If the pain is very mild, a shower can be soothing, but sometimes you may prefer to sit or lie

down, in which case a bath may be better. If you suffer from extreme period pain and are immobile, vomiting or constantly nauseous, you should see a doctor, who will be able to talk to you about options for controlling the regularity or intensity of your periods.

Another form of discomfort may happen when your breasts start developing. You will begin by growing buds. Sometimes this can cause a slight itching or irritation around your nipples and chest which feels somewhat like having a bruise. It will go away as your breasts develop.

Period practice...and the pad

Here is some instruction on putting on a pad. This is the one thing you can practice before you get your period (unlike a tampon), but don't worry if you don't get around to it; it is not difficult, although it may take several attempts.

First, you'll notice that the pad is wrapped up. Feel along both flat surfaces until you find a plastic flap. You can push your fingers under this flap and tear it, this will unwrap the pad. Some pads only have this covering, while others will have a second paper covering. It's simply a matter of unsticking and pulling off this second layer (a bit like a Band-Aid), which will then unravel/unfold the pad. Be careful it doesn't stick to itself; the paper was covering the part which will stick to your knickers. You'll also notice the pad is divided into two or three parts which are folded together (a bit like a packet of raw microwave popcorn). Note: Each brand of pads is different. For example, some are one single, long pad, whilst others are folded into two or three sections. If you are wearing knickers which have a seam near the front, line it up with the first fold from the top of the pad. Make sure it's straight and press down.

Ultimately the pad should cover from your pelvis (just before your vagina starts), and make sure it covers all of your vagina so as to soak up all of the blood. If you're in bed, an average every-day pad can stick to itself and scrunch up a bit as you sleep. Pads also have an annoying way of deciding when their shift is over, which can have you waking up with some blood on your knickers. It can be better to wear a night-time pad to bed. These are longer, will cover more of you and are less likely to fold up or stick to themselves.

Some pads, especially some night time pads, come with wings. These are flaps on the side. Unstick them from the outside of the pad the same way you unstuck the paper covering and fold them under your knickers.

Try to keep track of when you're due for your next period (Some women's periods are never regular). If it's nearly due, due or just overdue, make sure you wear a pad just in case and take extra pads with you when you go out so that you are prepared. If it comes unexpectedly and you happen to be out and don't have any pads, go into a toilet, fold up several strips of toilet paper together and place these in your knickers. It won't last you a long time, but it makes a nifty make shift pad.

Better in than Out: the Art of the Tampon

Now I'm going to teach you how to insert a tampon. This is possibly more important to teach you than how to wear a pad, because you can practise putting on a pad at any time. You can't practise using a tampon before you start having periods, because your blood flow provides a lubricant that allows the tampon to slide in easily. I wouldn't say that it's simple to teach one how to insert a tampon – particularly a blind person, because you can't see a demonstration of someone using one, and no one will be able to do it for you (for obvious reasons).

Can't I just use pads? In theory, I suppose you could, but a tampon is more hygienic if, for example, you want to go swimming. The cold water might very temporarily stop your blood flow, but it is best for other swimmers that you use a tampon in a public pool. Also, a tampon is very comfortable to use. If inserted correctly, you shouldn't be able to feel it.

IMPORTANT! Remember, tampons only last a couple of hours, and you must not wear them to bed. It's not healthy to have so much old blood trapped inside you. It could cause a poisonous infection known as Toxic Shock Syndrome. If a tampon comes out of you easily, its time is done. Anyway, here goes.

First and foremost, it is crucial that you relax. Some tampon packet instructions tell you to do this by putting your foot on the toilet lid. I haven't found this particularly helpful, preferring to squat. For a tampon beginner I recommend lying down. This, obviously can't be done just anywhere – probably only in your bedroom, so I suggest you only wear tampons around the house, until you get used to them.

1. Spread a towel either on the bathroom floor or on your bed, so that you don't get any blood on the floor or sheets. Lie down on the towel, with your legs up and open.
2. The plastic covering has three parts. First, find the flap/strip around the center and pull it off.
3. Then pull the plastic off the bottom of the tampon (the flat surface); this should just pull off in your fingers. **WARNING!** Do not take the plastic off the ballpoint round surface at the top. This is the end that you will insert, and isn't hygienic if exposed for too long.
4. After taking the plastic off the flat surface, look on the flat surface and find the knot of string. Pull this until a long length of string comes out. Make sure this stays hanging out and doesn't go into your vagina with the rest of the tampon as you will need it later in order to remove the tampon.
5. Now, you can pull the plastic off the other end.
6. If you don't get the tampon in the first time, get a fresh one. It's not clean to keep putting it in and taking it out.
7. Now that it's unwrapped, Holding the tampon in the fingers of one hand (I suggest your dominant hand), use one or two fingers of your other hand to

pull your labia (the lips of your vagina) apart. With your dominant hand, slide the tampon in as far as it will go. This shouldn't hurt. If it does, you either aren't relaxed or perhaps your blood flow isn't heavy enough for a tampon just yet. Make sure the string on the flat end is still hanging out. Remember. If you can't feel the tampon inside you, you know it's in far enough. If you can still feel it, just give it a gentle push.

Menstrual cups

An alternative to the pad or tampon is a menstrual cup. This is a reusable cup made of medical grade silicone. It sits inside your vagina to collect, rather than absorb, the menstrual blood. There are several advantages to the menstrual cup. Firstly, you can wear it for up to twelve hours at a time. Usually, this means that you can get away with only cleaning it morning and night.

Secondly, it is a cheaper alternative to tampons and pads. Other than the initial cost of buying the cup, you don't need to spend a lot of money on products. Thirdly, like the tampon, you can swim while wearing a menstrual cup. Finally, you can practice inserting and removing the cup even if you don't have your period. This may be a good idea so that you are prepared when it first happens.

What does a menstrual cup look like?

When you first see a menstrual cup it might be a little daunting. It is bigger than a tampon but once its inside you can't feel it. The cup usually comes in two sizes. Most women (except perhaps mothers who have given birth vaginally) will use the smaller size. The cup itself is bell-shaped and is approximately five centimetres deep. Many menstrual cups have measurements on the side so women can monitor their flow if they so desire. On the bottom of the cup is a stem that extends out approximately two centimetres. This is to help you remove it. The cup comes in a little carry pouch for safekeeping.

It is essential that you use and care for your cup properly to avoid any infections or irritation.

How to use the cup

1. Wash your hands before you begin. This is a crucial step when using any feminine hygiene product but possibly most importantly for the menstrual cup.
2. Rinse the cup off. This helps make sure that there is no fluff or dust from the pouch on it.
3. Lower your body down so it is easy to insert the cup. If you've had experience using a tampon this is a similar idea. Firstly, you need to try and relax so your muscles are not tight. To achieve this, you could squat, lie down on a bed or bathroom floor (see tampon instructions), or you could bend your knees slightly and lean forward.

4. Pinch the top of the cup so that its edges come together. Fold it in half. It should be in the shape of a print C or a U.
5. Slowly start pushing the cup inside your vagina. Do not insert it at a vertical angle. Instead, it should be inserted on a forty-five-degree angle (so aim it back towards the base of your spine). As it slides inside it will probably start to expand again. This will cause it to suction inside you and start collecting the blood. Don't worry though! If it has expanded before it's in the right position, you can just keep pushing it up until it's in the right place. The cup itself should be all the way inside, and no part of the stem should be protruding from your vagina. To make sure it works properly, the cup does need to have expanded. If you can feel that the cup is flat or scrunched when running your finger around the base of the cup, then try twisting it slightly or removing it and trying again.
6. When the time comes to empty and clean the cup, remember to wash your hands again first. Then, reach inside yourself slightly and pinch the base of the cup. This helps break the suction. Then use the base of the cup to pull it out. Do not pull on the stem as this can damage the cup (the stem is there to guide you to the base). Remember, there will be blood inside the cup so be careful! Tip the blood into the toilet or down the shower drain.
7. Rinse the cup thoroughly with warm water before following the same steps to reinsert it.
8. Cleaning the cup at the end of your cycle is a different process because you are going to store it away for next time. After you have removed and emptied the cup you need to sterilise it. The best way to do this is by putting it in a pot with boiling water for between ten to twenty minutes. You may like to get your hands on an old pot specifically for this purpose. Once dry, simply return the cup to its pouch ready for next time.

Other tips

- Don't be afraid to practice inserting and removing the cup a few times before your period. This will help make sure it all goes smoothly.
- Many women find it easier to insert the cup when it is wet. You may like to try and dampen the rim of the cup or the entrance to your vagina with water or water-based lubricant.
- Sometimes, it may not be possible to run the cup under warm water to wash it. This may especially be the case if you are using a public toilet. For these instances, you can purchase disinfectant wipes that you can keep in your bag. Simply wipe the cup and put the wipe in the sanitary bin. This will do for now in place of washing it.
- It is essential that you wash the cup regularly. Never wear it for more than twelve hours at a time as this can cause infections and discomfort.

- You may choose to wear a pad the first time you use the cup just in case you get some spotting. This can happen if it hasn't been inserted correctly. However, if the cup is the right size and has been inserted correctly, there will be no leaking.
- You may choose to carry the cup in its pouch with you in your bag so you are always prepared. It may be wise to carry pads with you just in case you are caught unawares. If this does happen, you can wear the pad until you get home and can clean yourself up and then switch to using the cup.
- Always store the cup in its carry pouch. Never store it in an airtight container.
- No part of the stem should be protruding outside the vagina. If it is, it may irritate your labia. To stop this, you can trim the stem slightly, but be careful not to damage the cup.
- There are several different folding techniques available. The one provided in this book is the most recommended technique by menstrual cup companies. However, if you are having trouble with it or would like to try other techniques there is ample information available on the internet.

Keeping clean

The following may sound obvious, but it's important to know how to correctly dispose of your sanitary products, and also what to do when you get blood on your knickers or sheets.

When disposing of a pad:

- Remove the pad from your underwear and roll it up, ensuring that the pad sticks to itself and the sticky surface is not exposed.
- Roll the used pad up in toilet paper and place it in the sanitary bin. N.B. Nearly all public toilets have a sanitary bin to the right or left of the bowl. Just in case you go to a toilet which doesn't contain a bin, take a plastic bag with you when you go out so you can dispose of the products properly when you find a bin, or when you're back home.
- **Do Not Put a Used Pad in the Bin Without Rolling it Up!** If you do so, the pad and blood sticks to the bin, which can be very unpleasant for the next person. Even more importantly, **Do Not Put a Used Pad in the Toilet!** This will block the toilet.

Disposing of tampons is much the same.

- Squat down in front of the toilet.
- Pull on the string to remove the tampon from your vagina.
- Once the tampon is out, roll it up in toilet paper and place it in the bin.
- **Do Not Put a Used Tampon in the Toilet!** This will also block the toilet.

Soaking

If your pad has been used for too long, or your period is unexpected or heavier than usual, blood can end up on your sheets or in your knickers. To avoid stains, simply scrub your knickers or sheets, soak them in Nappysan or soapy water for a few hours, and then wash them as per usual. Always soak and wash in cold water. Hot water makes blood stains permanent.

Some final points

I hope I've given you most of the information you need. Remember to talk to someone you trust if you require any clarification. The only other thing I would reiterate is: **KEEP CLEAN!** You may be craving a shower especially once the periods start. Make sure to wash yourself all over, and, in particular all your private parts, especially during your period. Remember not to wash your vagina with soap. This will cause irritation and discomfort as this is one of the most sensitive parts of your body. Make sure to get rid of any old blood and discharge. Not only can it start to smell but it will make you feel much better! Besides which there is, believe it or not, a true pleasure in caring for your body and looking after yourself. Remember: The things that happen to you are normal, so don't worry.