

Contemporary beliefs surrounding the menarche: a pilot study of adolescent girls at a school in middle England.

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Contemporary beliefs surrounding the menarche: a pilot study of adolescent girls at a school in middle England.

Despite menarche affecting half of the population, there is limited research into its effects and limited dialogue within UK society. As Relationships and Sex Education (RSE), which encompasses issues like puberty, becomes compulsory in all schools in England for the first time, understanding the impact of menarche is vital. This study aimed to explore the beliefs about and experiences of menarche in adolescent girls. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 participants aged 16-18 attending a secondary school in Warwickshire. A thematic analysis was carried out, with emerging themes discussed between two researchers.

All participants had received some RSE teaching at school, although many felt that it did not provide sufficient detail. These sessions also occurred too late for some participants who had already reached menarche. A range of emotions were recalled at this milestone; while some girls felt prepared and mature, others reported disbelief and shame. Mothers were the most important person for guidance, while conversations with fathers about menstruation were generally avoided. GPs were not considered a source of advice, despite some participants experiencing significant symptoms and menstrual irregularity.

It is clear that the impact of menarche should not be underestimated and stigma surrounding menstruation still exists today. To address these issues, suggested improvements include mixed gender teaching to promote open discussions and making the role of GPs more visible to the adolescent community.

Keywords: menarche; puberty; adolescent medicine

Context

Despite menarche affecting half of the population, there is limited research into its effects and limited dialogue within UK society. Feelings of stigma and shame surrounding menstruation affect healthcare accessibility, with a survey reporting almost 80% of British girls had not consulted a healthcare professional, despite suffering worrying menstrual symptoms [1].

In September 2020, guidelines from the Department for Education were enforced, making Relationships and Sex Education (RSE), which encompasses issues like puberty, compulsory in all schools in England for the first time [2]. Understanding girls' perspectives on starting their periods can provide educators and healthcare professionals with timely information which can facilitate access to advice at this developmentally sensitive time.

Aim

To explore the beliefs about and experiences of menarche in adolescent girls at a school in middle England.

Description

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling from a school in Warwickshire. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, using a topic guide containing questions about participants' experiences of menarche and how their understanding of menarche had developed. Interviews were conducted individually or in pairs, recorded and then transcribed verbatim. A thematic analysis was used, with iterative analysis allowing initial ideas to be developed while interviews were still ongoing. A second researcher reviewed the transcripts and themes were discussed. During analysis of the final

interview, no new codes were generated and findings were in line with emerging themes. Outcomes were reported to the school.

Outcomes

Eleven participants aged 16-18 were recruited and interviewed. The median age at menarche was 12 years old, with a range of 9-14 years old. Participants had attended a variety of schools previously, providing a range of experiences of RSE teaching. Four themes relating to the study aims were identified: 'education and information seeking', 'the influence of others', 'emotional responses', and 'becoming a woman'.

Education and information seeking

All participants had received some teaching at school, although the timing and quality varied. This led to gaps in knowledge regarding symptoms and regularity of menstrual cycles, and some girls admitted to not learning about menstruation until they had reached menarche. Many respondents questioned the 'normal' 28 day cycle that was taught, when few of them experienced this. Participants felt that teaching could be improved by explaining what periods are and why they happen, alongside practicalities such as the use of sanitary products. The internet was considered a useful information source, particularly due to the anonymity provided.

The influence of others

Mothers were unanimously regarded as the main source of guidance at menarche and fathers were excluded from discussions. Boys at school made participants feel uncomfortable about their periods and many stressed that boys should be included in menstruation teaching to combat this. Other than school nurses, healthcare professionals were not often cited as a source of advice; only two participants stated that they would consult a GP about their periods, despite many suffering from significant symptoms.

Emotional responses

While some participants felt educated and prepared for menarche, others recalled a spectrum of emotions when learning about or experiencing it. Disbelief that one might experience menstruation was common, due to such issues not being a matter of routine conversation. Shame was reported by some respondents, with those who had reached menarche before their peers choosing to keep it secret. Others felt self-conscious when menstruating, avoiding activities such as sport. Some girls were relieved, due to the pressure they felt they were under to reach this milestone.

Becoming a woman

Reaching menarche was regarded as marking the transition from girl to woman. Those who reached menarche at a younger age associated it with maturity not possessed by those yet to experience it.

Conclusions

The overall impact of menarche should not be underestimated and although some girls do feel prepared, others experience distress and shame. As RSE becomes compulsory [2], teaching must meet the needs of all girls before they reach menarche. Suggested changes include addressing the basic physiology of menstruation, practical guidance on managing it and mixed gender sessions to promote open discussions with the aim of breaking down the stigma surrounding menarche.

Beyond school nurses, healthcare professionals such as GPs were not a source of information for the participants, despite many girls suffering significant menstrual symptoms. Access to school nurses is becoming more difficult [3], thus leaving a concerning section of adolescents whose needs are not being met. Schools should

consider involving GPs in RSE teaching to increase their visibility and highlight their role to the adolescent community.

While limited by its size, this study provides a useful insight into the experiences of menarche had by adolescents today and how their needs can be supported by educators and GPs.

Disclosure statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

Ethical approval

Approval for this study was confirmed by the UCL Research Ethics Committee on 17th January 2018.

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