

HEALTH IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND ATHLETICS

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This section of the Journal is a project of the Committee on The Health Aspects of Physical Education and Athletics. Many schools still automatically grant girls a once a month excuse from physical education in spite of the evidence that such a policy is neither necessary nor desirable. If your school is in this group, perhaps the following opinions may convince you of the necessity for re-considering your policy.

Should Girls Be Automatically Excused From Physical Education During Menstruation?

A two-letter word answers this. And "NO" also answers the correlative question "Should girls automatically participate in physical education during menstruation?"

Thus, medical evidence and judgment recommends that practices be individualized and not automatic to either extreme.

The majority of older girls and women can safely, and with fair comfort, continue in all their usual activities throughout the menstrual period.

Probably about one-fourth or one-third of secondary school girls, after menarche, will experience sufficient distress at some time during their menses to interfere with usual activities. The most common time for this distress is from a few hours before to a few hours after the onset of the discharge. But with sensible attention to maintenance of body warmth and a good physical condition, the menses do not incapacitate for physical education or recreational programs.

Excuses from school showers and swimming classes, however, are usually recommended during the menstrual period as matters of good taste and good citizenship more than as a necessity for health. MILDRED DOSTER, M.D., Assistant Director, School Health Services, Denver Public Schools, Denver, Colorado.

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In this modern age where physical fitness is considered so important for youth, I agree with most physical education teachers and many doctors that activity followed by a shower is beneficial for girls during their menstrual periods, if they are normal. In extreme cases, a girl may be excused from active exercise if her physician requests it.

Girls, today, too often use this as an excuse to get out of a class that many do not enjoy. Sometimes, parents are responsible for their daughters' fears and pamper them because of their own experiences; a lot of which is founded on "old wives tales."

We find that if young girls of 12 or 13 years are shown the Walt Disney movie, *The Story of Menstruation*, other slides and information, they accept menstruation as a normal part of "growing up and take it in their stride."

We have found that exercise for the normal girls in our schools is never detrimental to their health. Therefore, I do not think that girls should be automatically excused from physical education during menstruation. FLORINE N. THOMPSON, R.N., F.A.S.H.A., Supervisor of Nurses, Medical Department, Richmond Public Schools, Richmond, Virginia.

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The fact that this question is still being raised in schools today has interesting implications for health education. For a good many years teachers have not lacked confirmation from the fields of physiology and medicine to support the view point that exercise is not only *not* harmful, but, in fact, may actually be helpful in cases of primary dysmenorrhea. Thus, one wonders why "to excuse, or not to excuse" is still a question in the 1960's.

The answer lies more in the area of health attitudes than in health knowledge. According to pediatricians, the underlying factor in the discomfort associated with primary dysmenorrhea is far more likely to be psychological than physiological. Girls with severe discomfort due to some abnormal condition will most likely find it necessary to remain home the first twelve hours or so. Therefore, the physical education teacher is fairly safe in establishing a policy of participation for any girls (a) who are able to attend school and take part in other class activities, and (b) who are not specifically forbidden exercise by the family physician. In the latter case a written statement should be required.

Becoming accustomed to menstrual periods, accepting the temporary and relatively minor annoyances associated with this period, and, moreover, developing a desire to carry on regular activities as nearly the same as possible is a wholesome attitude which should be encouraged. Often the tactful and understanding physical education teacher is a key person in helping an adolescent girl to acquire this positive attitude. This has even proven to be so in cases when the apprehension of an anxious mother might be having the exact opposite effect.

Many teachers suggest that if a girl feels unable to participate actively that day, she should still be required to dress for class. Then no further pressure need be made, but more often than not, the girl herself may decide she might as well join her friends in the day's activities. This type of gentle and persistent encouragement to accept the menstrual period as a "normal" condition for many years to come is most likely to be well accepted. Girls are also discovering that exercise decreases tensions, aids in blood circulation and frequently actually relieves symptoms of discomfort they had formerly experienced.

Thus, in summary, it is strongly recommended that the physical education teacher should not excuse a girl who is able to be in school from dressing for an attending class; and that, moreover, she feels it her special responsibility to foster a positive, accepting, and wholesome attitude toward an essential feminine physiological function. GERTRUDE B. COUCH, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Health Education, University of Illinois.

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