

Periods on expedition

A large percentage of the world's population have periods, sometimes talking about them is thought of as taboo or disgusting, but it's important to know how best to manage them on expeditions.

Supplies

If you have periods, try to remember to pack some supplies even if your period isn't due. The nature of expedition life, things like being more stressed, more relaxed, more physically active, and living in close quarters with other people and their hormones can all impact your cycle. If you do get caught out, just ask your supervisor or Pete or Claire for 'the red box'- we always have a supply of tampons, towels, and nappy bags available for use. We'll never judge or question you about it, and it won't count against you in terms of self sufficiency for your expedition. I (Claire) know first hand what it's like dealing with heavy and unpredictable periods on long expeditions, and will do what I can to help make things easier.



Where to pack it all?

Most rucksacks have lots of pockets. Personally I've always found it easiest to keep all sanitary and toileting supplies, along with a ziplock bag for rubbish and a bottle of hand gel, in the top pocket of my rucksack. This way it's easy to get to relatively discreetly when you stop, and you don't need to pull it all out to dig out your waterproofs. It's the easiest part of the bag to find, even in the dark, so I also keep my headtorch and any medication in there. If you need to, you can keep your rucksack stood up next to you to provide some extra privacy, and still access all those supplies in the top pocket easily. Some rucksacks have a pocket on the inside of the lid as well as the outside, giving you more options for where to tuck things away.



Tampons

A lot of people use tampons, and it's really important to make sure your hands are clean before you insert them. Non-applicator tampons are smaller and lighter to carry, though some have a much thinner string. Applicator tampons can be easier to insert. Make sure you change your tampon every few hours through the day, and if you are planning to use them but haven't before, practice first as some find them uncomfortable, or bring a backup supply of pads.

Disposable pads

Sanitary pads come in all shapes and sizes, from pantliners designed for low flow or to back up insertable protection, to extra long pads with wings. The winged variety generally stay in place better when you are walking all day. Some people prefer pads for expeditions as you don't have to worry quite as much about your hands being 100% clean before, though others find they get smelly faster and can cause chafing due to the constant moving, particularly for walking expeditions. By canoe they don't chafe as much as walking, but absorb a lot of water if you capsize and will need changing when you get out of the water.

Disposing of waste

Nappy bags are great for putting your sanitary products in if you need to change away from toilet facilities. Sanitary products and wet wipes don't degrade, and should never be left in a hole, behind a bush, or flushed down a toilet— they block main sewers adding to 'fatbergs', and cause massive problems for water systems that aren't on the mains. Nappy bags are tie-top so if needs be you can open them up and add more later, or ziplock sandwich bags work the same. Sanitary products can go in any normal bin in small quantities; some campsites and public toilets will have specific sanitary bins, so use these as a preference, otherwise they can go in a normal bin.

Zero waste / eco friendly options

Reusable pads and period panties

Reusable pads are very similar to the disposable variety, but made of cloth. Those with wings have poppers underneath to attach to themselves around your underwear to keep them in place, and most use highly absorbent materials such as bamboo, with a fleece layer to feel dry on top. They are a lot more comfortable for walking, but slightly bulkier to carry, and used ones can go in a small roll top drybag or a nappy bag until you can get home to wash them. Most pads are designed with a waterproof back and poppers on the wings, so once folded in on themselves they're quite clean to handle.



Generally it's best to rinse them in cold water as soon as possible after use (even if this is 48 hours later) as hot water or leaving them to dry out can set the stains into the fabric. They can then be wrung out and packed away to go in the washing machine at home.



There are a lot of different styles of period pants, and they can be quite expensive, but should last a long time. Some are simply normal pants with a waterproof layer in the gusset & back panel, to reduce the likelihood of leaks reaching your clothes. When you're active all day, these can get a bit sweaty as they don't let your skin breathe, so they're not ideal for expeditions. Others have built in layers of absorbency, like cloth pads, and due to the absorbent layers being built into the pants they stay in place better than pads that can sometimes move around as you walk.

Menstrual cups

Menstrual cups, such as moon cups, are insertable cups that hold greater volumes of liquid than tampons, and can be worn for up to 12 hours (check individual manufacturer's guidelines). They are usually made of silicone, and most are reusable. If you haven't used one before, it's best to practice inserting it and taking it out in the shower. As long as your hands are clean, most can be removed, emptied, rinsed and re-inserted. Carrying a small separate water bottle for rinsing your cup is a great way of getting through an expedition. Some brands recommend sterilizing between use, which can be done in a small Tupperware tub of water with a sterilizing tablet (such as Milton mini) or being boiled in water in your stove (after rinsing!). Others can be cleaned with warm water and soap. A good rule of thumb, particularly for longer expeditions, is to have one to wear and one spare, so if you are unable to clean your first effectively you have a sterilized one in a bag or box ready to go.



Managing your periods using hormone tablets

Some people choose to use hormonal birth control to change when their period happens or to make it less severe. This is very much a matter of personal choice and is something you should talk to a doctor well in advance about to find out if this is the right choice for you. You may find that hormonal birth control does not completely stop your period, experiment before your trip and make sure you bring some products to use if it doesn't work out. **Period delay pills** Some people choose to talk to their doctor about a period delay pill such as Norethisterone. This medication contains the hormone progesterone and can be used to delay a period for up to 20 days.

Neither of these are 100% guaranteed to work, which can mean you get caught off guard, personally I find it easier to just 'go with the flow' rather than stressing about trying to stop it.

Pain Management Cramps can be a very fast way to spoil an otherwise amazing outdoors experience. Many people use painkillers and heat to help with this. If using painkillers, ibuprofen is a popular choice, but this is something you should talk to a pharmacist or doctor about. Single use, stick on, "muscle relaxant" heat-pads are available at most pharmacies and many shops. Hand warmer versions are available without a sticky side and some are reusable. They are great for use while walking and moving around at camp. Make sure you read the instructions as some types shouldn't be applied directly to the skin.

You can put hot water in your drinking bottle overnight as a **hot water bottle**. Make sure the bottle is designed to withstand heat, and take the lid off every so often as it cools, as it can be stiff otherwise. Put it in a sock to avoid direct skin contact, keeping it warm longer without burning you. Don't use boiling water, and make sure the lid is done up properly to avoid leaks.



Stay hydrated— despite sometimes feeling bloated during your period, you need to remember that your body is losing fluids, not only directly through your period, but some people experience night sweats and hot flushes through the day at that time of the month, too. You use more water from your body during expedition on top of this, but staying hydrated can reduce the cramps and pain.

Support

Talk to your team mates! Everyone knows that periods are something that happens, and they may be more understanding if you need longer/ more regular toilet breaks, pain relief, chocolate or moral support. Some boys may decide to throw chocolate at you and run away, but hey, at least you'll have the chocolate! Periods can be a bit of a taboo subject, and some feel embarrassed, but remember it's a normal bodily function. If you find any part of the expedition hard, you can always talk to your supervisor or assessor. They can suggest ways to help you cope. Most of our instructors are pretty clued up on managing periods on expedition, and if they're not we encourage them to learn, so they might contact me for advice to pass on.