

Sport and menstruation ⁽¹⁾

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The question of whether and to what extent sport should be practised during the menstrual period still remains unanswered by the majority of gynaecologists. The generally accepted rule is that during menstruation physical exertion should be reduced to a minimum, if not entirely avoided. Those in favour of this reason that during the period a wound is formed in the cavum uteri, similar to one caused by an abortion, and that this wound is connected with the outer world by the vaginal bloodstreams. It is generally believed that the chances of a rising infection are considerably reduced during the menstrual period.

Therefore, it is only natural for women, on hearing similar views from their physicians, to endeavour to take special care of themselves during this period. Moreover, they get confirmation of their beliefs that menstruation is, or is causing, an illness instead of taking it for what it is - an entirely normal, natural process. Furthermore, there comes the age-old superstition and the astounding ignorance of laymen regarding the true essence of menstruation. These false ideas are probably the cause of the majority of women still being reluctant to wash their genital organs, take a bath, practise some sport or do gymnastics during menstruation. These false ideas are probably the cause of all this. One may readily understand, therefore, that menstruation, which in itself is already rather unaesthetic, should be labelled by popular belief as "*being sick*" or "*being unwell*". The more so, as due to these said misconceptions, the ugliness of this natural process is multiplied by pre-menstrual tension, irritability, depression and pains.

It was claimed for the first time by NOVAK and HARNIK, in their work on psychic development of menstrual colic and its treatment, published in 1929, that girls and women ought to be trained to regard menstruation as an entirely normal process, behaving exactly as usual and never speaking of menstruation as of an illness or indisposition. It has been proved, in the case of a series of girls and women who after a physical exercise or a cold had severe menstrual pains (dysmenorrhoea), that these pains had been originated by a psychic trauma or the fear of the consequences of that exercise or cold, rather than by the physical strain or chill itself. Such a psychic trauma, or one based on sexual inadequacies, may prove to be the primary cause of most cases of dysmenorrhoea, which is then kept on or increased by the next pre-menstrual tension and the fear of coming pains, combined with a rising inferiority complex and the idea of being some-

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what "sick". The treatment in such cases consisted in raising to consciousness the psychical conflicts, and in clarifying the part they played in establishing dysmenorrhoea. Women have been advised to behave normally during menstruation, and moreover, to continue practising sports and even taking part in competitions. We drew these conclusions after close observation of 247 cases during a period of four years.

Through further experience that I gained during our work with NOVAK, I felt compelled to go further still, asking that girls and women be trained to carry on in their usual pattern of life even during the menstrual period. This has never caused any harm; on the contrary, it has been proved that a large number of women, besides entirely overcoming dysmenorrhoea through the elucidation of psychic conflicts, also became free of the inferiority complex caused by painful menstruation.

These views are the result of thorough observation, for a period of about 25 years, of a vast number of women in the Maccabee Sports Organisation, both in Austria and Israel. Almost every kind of sport is practised within the framework of this organisation and most members take part in competitions as well. Although the object of our investigation was first of all the influence of sport upon the female body in general, the changes of the menstruation anamnesis that that might have evoked by practising sports have also been closely scrutinized. From several hundred, 134 girls and women have been selected for closer observation, all of whom used to exercise sport and partake in competitions including during the menstrual period. Their ages ranged from 14 to 26 years - the average age being 17½. These are the sports they practised: gymnastics, acrobatics, swimming, tennis, riding, and some bicycling and motoring. Many of the 134 women pursued several of these sports.

It may be stated that there was not a single case where the practising of sports during menstruation would have caused the slightest harm to the female genital organs. Whenever some irregularity occurred in menstruation, it has been revealed that in most cases there have been such small disturbances before. Besides, in any case, the subjects involved were all quite young girls, with whom such menstrual irregularities may be considered as normal.

At this point, I should like particularly to comment on swimmers. I have material on 19 cases for study - girls and women at the top of the Maccabee Sports Organisation - all of them used to taking part in swimming competitions during menstruation. I have always had difficulties when trying to convince parents and family doctors of competitors that no harm would come from their swimming during menstruation and that the age-old taboo of bathing and swimming during the period should be lifted. Fifteen out of the nineteen swimmers have never had any disturbance or illness that could have originated from swimming during menstruation. The remaining four reported that occasionally after strenuous swimming during menstruation the flow would weaken or stop altogether for a few hours or perhaps a day or two. Then it would start anew and last one or two days more than usual, without however causing any trouble. Also, sometimes, the next menstruation would come a day or two before the time.

I can see no harm in the stopping or lengthening of the menstrual period as provoked occasionally by physical strain. Rather I consider it a protection against any rising infection as in this instance the uterus is closed.

It is interesting to see the attitude that literature, particularly that of recent years, takes to this question. Presumably the oldest studies come from Johnstone. A good many of his patients who complained of dysmenorrhoea before World War II had been completely cured when they had to drive heavy ambulance cars in France or do some other strenuous war job. On returning to their previous monotonous work after the War, these women got back their dysmenorrhoea and in some cases much stronger than before. I had the opportunity of making similar observations during World War II.

Also of great importance is the result of a study of menstruation of 200 cases, made by TAYLOR published by the National Health Insurance, England, in 1942. This study devotes special attention to primary dysmenorrhoea. The work is based mostly on the various publications of NOVAK and HARNIK. Its main point is that girls and women should be taught to regard menstruation as a normal process, and therefore to continue with what they would do ordinarily. Forbidding the practice of something during menstruation on the grounds that it is harmful to health, is the surest way to develop an inferiority complex, and consequently of dysmenorrhoea.

The experiments carried out in some advanced girls' schools in England should suffice to prove that a healthy girl will not be harmed even by strenuous sports during menstruation. The majority of leading physicians in the otherwise so conservative England now agree with these opinions and only a few, among them DAVIS, are still hesitating to allow the practice of energetic sports during menstruation.

The results of my investigations, as well as the experiments in the girls' schools in England should lead to a general revision of the old ideas regarding physical exertion during menstruation. Girls should be instructed to persist in their practice of sport, even in milder cases of dysmenorrhoea. This is the easiest way to conquer the menstrual inferiority complex and to have all the beneficial effects of sport upon health. This would, of course, be much more workable if it were not hindered by the doctor's persistence of blaming sports for menstrual irregularities.



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