Pre-menstrual Syndrome and Dysmenorrhea: Urban-Rural and Multi-ethnic Differences in Perception, Impacts, and Treatment Seeking

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Abstract

Background: Attitudes toward menarche and menstruation are largely influenced by sociological, cultural, and family environmental factors. Recognizing the influential effects that these factors might have on shaping adolescents' attitudes is crucial in designing a more effective means of transmitting health information.

Aims: This study aimed to gather an in-depth understanding of perceptions, impacts, and treatment seeking on menstruation-related issues from an ethnically mixed group of rural and urban girls.

Methodology: In total, 27 focus group discussions (172 participants) were conducted between November 2008 and April 2009. Participants were adolescent girls aged 13-19 years, recruited from 7 public secondary schools in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur and 4 public secondary schools from the rural districts of Kelantan, in Malaysia.

Results: Many participants revealed that they were not given or had not received detailed information about the mechanism or physiology of menstruation prior to its onset. Thus, many described the onset of menarche as shocking, an event for which they were unprepared, and which has had a tremendous impact on their emotions. More positive acceptance of menarche was reported in the urban than with the rural groups. Despite the high prevalence of pre-menstrual syndrome and dysmenorrhea, participants across urban-rural and ethnic groups perceived the problems as completely normal, hence they relied on self-care methods and did not want to seek professional treatment. More rural girls compared to urban girls were embarrassed to talk to their mothers or consult their physicians regarding menstruation-related problems.

Conclusion: Menstruation-related education would have a positive impact in improving adolescent girls' knowledge and in nurturing a positive attitude toward menstruation-related matters at home, at school, and in the community.

Key Words: Menstruation, Dysmenorrhea, Premenstrual syndrome, Urban-rural, Multi-ethnic, Adolescent

Introduction

Adolescence is a transitional state between childhood and adulthood during which one's reproductive health and well-being are tremendously affected.1 Adolescent girls have a variety of attitudes and perceptions, often negative rather than positive, toward menarche and menstruation.2 Among the positive attitudes are menarche symbolizes adulthood, sexual maturity, and femininity.2 The underlying hypothesis is the association between menstruation with women's sexual attitudes, desires, and behaviors, and it has been postulated that women who were embarrassed about sexuality may have similar reactions toward menstruation.3 Negative attitudes are related to physical discomfort, feeling annoyed, and embarrassment, and they are also associated with a variety of social disturbances such as disruption of social activities and interactions, school performance, and what has even been described as a hygienic crisis.2,4,7 The public's negative perceptions of menstruation have also had a huge impact on shaping adolescents' attitudes toward their menstrual perception. There have been reports that the public viewed women as more emotional during menstruation and that they could not function well at work, and the public was also under the misperception that menstruation affects a woman's ability to think rationally.4,8,9

Women's attitudes toward menstruation have also been suggested to be related to both internal physiological and external factors related to the cultural context and social environment. Several findings indicate that attitudes toward menarche and menstruation are socially and culturally constructed, rather than genetic.5-7 A vast majority of studies on the influence of social environment and culture on attitudes toward menstruation revealed variability in within-culture/religious and urban-rural settings.4,8-14 For instance, compared to Western countries, the prevalence of menstrual symptoms was found to be relatively lower in Asian countries.8 Urban-rural differences in the prevalence of menstrual symptoms were believed the result of differences in culture surrounding menstruation in urban and rural areas.4

It has been postulated that manifestation of menstrual symptoms is associated with attitudes toward menstruation.5,15 In a conservative, rural society, menstruation is considered shameful and a hidden topic. In spite of these negative attitudes, the levels of discomfort and pain from

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