Let’s Talk About Periods:
All you ever wanted to know about vaginas, women’s health, and menstruation
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This compilation of articles explores the cultural meanings of menstruation and the customs surrounding it. Berkeley and Gottlieb offer an interesting counterpoint to the predominately negative interpretations most scholars have given rites that seclude menstruators from the rest of their communities. Many scholars have argued that such rites are oppressive to women and reinforce their subordinate status; Berkeley and Gottlieb problematize these arguments by suggesting that these customs sometimes provide women with a welcome respite from daily tasks as well as an opportunity for solidarity with other women.


Peggy McCracken explains how blood symbolism defined the gendered ideologies of the Middle Ages. Men, McCracken demonstrates, have historically shed blood publicly on the battlefield; men’s blood therefore came to symbolize heroism. Women, by contrast, have shed blood privately during menstruation, a form of bloodshed widely considered to be impure and dangerous for non-menstruators. However, McCracken also acknowledges, much like Buckley and Gottlieb in Blood Magic, that views of menstrual blood were more nuanced that we might imagine; some medieval texts and myths reveal the belief that menstrual blood had strong healing properties and could actually be a source of power.


In Periods Gone Public, lawyer and author Jennifer Weiss-Wolf examines contemporary U.S. politics surrounding menstruation, including the repeal of the “tampon tax” and the passage of regulations to ensure safer sanitary supplies. She also explores the recent explosion of period activism into public consciousness.


Twenty-year-old author Nadya Okamoto is the founder of a nonprofit called PERIOD which distributes sanitary supplies to menstruators in need as well as advocates to eliminate stigma surrounding the topic. This book outlines the problem with the menstrual taboo and the mission of her organization. Okamoto also describes the physiology behind menstruation. Though it is engaging and informative for adult readers, Period Power would be the perfect read for pre- and post-menarcheal adolescent girls looking to understand their bodies.


In the late 1960s, as Second-Wave Feminism was in full motion, a group of women at a conference at Emmanuel College to discuss experiences with health and the medical establishment. This group, which later became the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, compiled a rich body of knowledge about women’s health and sexuality and published it in 1973 as Our Bodies, Ourselves. This compendium, as New York Times Writer Jessica Valenti aptly puts it, “[f]or generations of girls…was the
starter pack to adulthood,” containing almost everything you could want to learn about female bodies, sexuality, reproduction (including menstruation), and aging. Yes, all of this information can be found on the internet, but nothing beats the polished, organized chapters of a well-researched, well-edited encyclopedia.


Author Abby Norman chronicles her own journey with endometriosis, a chronic illness in which uterine tissue grows outside of the uterus, often leading to debilitating and elusive pain. While describing her own experiences managing endometriosis and struggling to be taken seriously by the medical community, Norman describes the historical precedence for ignoring female pain. Though it does not directly addressing the topic of menstruation, Ask Me About My Uterus is an essential – and compelling – read for anyone looking to understand how and why women’s health concerns continue to be stifled in a patriarchal world.


Originally published in 1983, this series of essays by the illustrious feminist, writer, and activist Gloria Steinem remains fresh and relevant in 2019 – albeit with some rather démodé vocabulary. Steinem takes on topics like genital mutilation, pornography, Playboy Bunnies, and gender inequality. “If Men Could Menstruate” stands out as a particularly funny and pointed thought experiment. Read this chapter if you read nothing else on this list.


Maya Dusenbery, editor of Feministing.com, examines the ways in which misogyny invades medicine and prevents women from receiving the care they need. Chapter six, entitled “The Curse of Eve: When Being Sick is ‘Normal,’” describes how the Western medical establishment deals with – or, rather, doesn’t deal with – menstrual pain and endometriosis.

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