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## The Importance of Menstrual Health Education: Addressing the Knowledge Gap Among Young Women in the United States

Sexual education is an essential program that orients young men and women to the cascade of neuroendocrine changes associated with puberty. However, researchers have identified a gap in the education of young women regarding menstruation<sup>1-4</sup>. The median age of onset of menarche has decreased from 12.1 years in 1995 to 11.9 years in 2017<sup>5</sup>. This trend emphasizes the need for menstruation education to be taught in elementary schools before the onset of puberty-associated developmental changes. While menstruation and puberty education are typically embedded with the broader category of sexual health education programs, only 21% of elementary schools that teach students ages 8-12 currently provide sex education programs<sup>1</sup>. This statistic indicates a large population of young women do not have access to sex education, and therefore, menstruation education, and as a result, are deprived of socially, mentally, and physically beneficial content.

A growing number of young women within the United States report feeling unprepared for the onset of puberty and menstruation, again emphasizing a lack of knowledge and understanding of critical topics in women's health<sup>6</sup>. In a national survey, 165 women (ages 18-37) reflected on their early menstruation experiences and reported having wanted more information about various topics relating to menstruation, such as navigating menstrual product options and how to manage period cramps<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, a survey conducted of 1,010 menstruating students (ages 13-19) found that 74% of students have questions about their periods. Yet, only 43% report having an open and safe space to discuss these topics.

A lack of education and social support surrounding puberty and menstruation can have negative implications for early-maturing girls. Those who have reported feeling the least prepared for the onset of puberty and menstruation are often at higher risk of poor body image, depression, and engaging in risk-taking behaviors such as the early onset of sexual activity. Implementing menstruation education programs has been shown to help mitigate these negative effects<sup>6</sup>. The content of these menstruation education programs focused on objective information about the physiology of menstruation, the mechanics of menstrual hygiene, and the subjective experience of feeling prepared for the onset of menstruation<sup>7</sup>. Additionally, education in these subjects has also become increasingly important due to recent political changes regarding abortion access and challenges to female bodily autonomy. Providing educational menstruation content in schools can equip young women with the necessary information to identify a missed period early and, therefore, allow them to pursue an abortion if desired.

Health, specifically menstrual health, is a basic human right<sup>8</sup>. For those who menstruate, this means a right to accurate menstrual health information and the subsequent knowledge required to autonomously seek medical care, perform self-care surrounding menstruation and engage in conversation about reproduction.

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