

Original research article

Menstruation and amenorrhea: opinion of Brazilian women

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Abstract

Contemporary women experience more menstrual cycles than their predecessors, and their menstrual patterns are modified by contraceptives. Amenorrhea is one side effect that has recently been advocated as desirable. This qualitative study investigated Brazilian women's views regarding the suppression of menstruation using hormones. Data were collected through eight focus groups, following a semistructured guideline. Sixty-four women, 21–51 years old, all menstruating regularly and all of whom had already initiated sexual activity and had no perceived infertility participated. Discussions were recorded, transcribed and entered into the computer, using the Ethnograph V 5.0 software to aggregate similar patterns. Thematic content analysis revealed that menstruation and amenorrhea were both seen with ambiguity. Although regarded as a nuisance, menstruation was associated with femaleness, youth, fertility and health. Most women, although they would like to be free from menstruation, feared negative consequences of induced amenorrhea and even regarded the proposition as a male intrusion into what they consider a natural female condition.

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1. Introduction

Menstruation has been linked to women in such a way that its cyclic nature marked the distinction between sexes beyond physical attributes [1]. It is also an indicator of female reproductive capacity [2]. Up to the development of modern contraceptives, amenorrhea was a temporary event, occurring during pregnancy and lactation until the onset of menopause. New contraceptives are highly effective, but one of their side effects is the change in menstrual patterns, such as increase or decrease in the amount of blood loss or in the number of bleeding days, as well as spotting, irregularity and amenorrhea [3,4].

Reduction in blood loss, including amenorrhea, has been seen as clinically beneficial, particularly for women with iron-deficiency anemia [3]. Despite this benefit, the suppression of menstruation has been a primary cause of discontinuation of use of contraceptive methods, showing that it is not well accepted in some cultures [3]. On the other hand,

amenorrhea has been regarded as desirable by some European women [5]. Independently of these contradictory findings, contemporary women are now able to choose, by using hormones, whether to menstruate or not.

The concept that amenorrhea is a normal condition for the human female was raised by Short [6] decades ago, recalling that until recently in history, women got pregnant soon after menarche, had prolonged lactational amenorrhea, followed by successive pregnancies and periods of breastfeeding until menopause. Thus, women's natural condition would be to menstruate around 50 times in their lifetime, instead of going through 400 or more menstrual cycles, as modern women do [7–10]. He argued that changing that "natural condition" could be risky. In fact, the occurrence of a large number of menstrual cycles has been associated with various health issues [5,9–11]. These associations have become the strongest argument of advocates in favor of suppressing menstruation [6,11].

Worldwide, a debate has taken place in the scientific community between those in favor of and those against the convenience of suppressing menstruation. Some believe that suppression involves health risks while others consider that it is almost a panacea for all problems related to the

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menstrual period. In Brazil, Coutinho and Segal [7] have been the main advocates to argue that menstruation is not only unnecessary but even harmful to the female organism, proposing the regular induction of amenorrhea.

Many studies have been published in relation to the relative importance of amenorrhea as a reason for discontinuation of contraceptive methods and on the proportion of women who would accept amenorrhea or not. Nevertheless, there is little information on what women think about experiencing monthly bleeding and on their perception of the meaning of amenorrhea. The purpose of this article is to present the results of a study on Brazilian women's views on menstruation and on amenorrhea, whether deliberate or as a side effect of the use of a hormonal contraceptive method.

2. Subjects and methods

A qualitative study was carried out in Campinas, an industrial city with approximately 1 million inhabitants, located in the southeast of the country in the state of São Paulo. The sample consisted of 64 women, 21–51 years old, who menstruated regularly, had already initiated their sexual life and who did not consider themselves infertile. Participants were recruited through the “snowball” technique: eligible women were identified and asked to provide names of female friends or relatives whom they considered similar to themselves [12,13], as a way of facilitating approach.

Data were obtained through focus groups [14] whose participants were homogenized by age and education. A pretested discussion guideline was used by the moderator. It included questions on the significance of menstruation and women's acceptance of changes in their menstrual patterns and of amenorrhea.

Discussions were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were entered into a computer using the Ethnograph V 5.0 software. Thematic content analysis was carried out by identifying and coding patterns in the participants' speech [15] and using symbolic interactionism as the theoretical framework. According to symbolic interactionism, every new perception fits into a net of meanings created through personal experience, education and cultural background. The meaning of each event is communicated to other people through a dynamic process of interaction [16].

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Faculty of Medical Sciences, Universidade Estadual de Campinas. Participants signed an informed consent form.

3. Results and discussion

The results presented in this article reflect the opinions on menstruation and amenorrhea of Brazilian women.

Because this was a qualitative study, only small samples were interviewed, and participants cannot be considered representative of the population's view. However, this information provides insight on the acceptability of menstrual suppression. The statements of the women in this study revealed their differing attitudes toward their own menstruation, reflected in the way they reacted to the possibility of its artificial suppression. Both menstruation and amenorrhea were regarded with an intrinsic ambivalence.

I realize...that everybody talks badly about it. “I am menstruating, what a curse!. I wanted to go to the beach so much and the menses came... I have cramps... I am dressed in white, the cloth will be spotted.” But if a woman does not menstruate she feels excluded from the others... We damn menstruation, but on the other hand we want to menstruate, because we want to feel as a woman, feminine... .

Some women viewed their menstruation as an integral and natural part of themselves; it was associated with values cherished by most of them: a sign of health, fertility and femaleness. For other women, menstruation provided certainty of them not being pregnant.

...the year I took it [Depo-Provera], I did not menstruate. I became very worried! I discontinued it and now I'm on the pill. For I prefer to see it, to know. I feel better; this is the only way I can be sure I'm not pregnant... .

Amenorrhea was seen with great suspicion by the women who valued menstruation. According to most of them, suppressing menstruation would place these values in jeopardy and would certainly result in problems. Participants justified their suspiciousness based on certain determinism: menstruation exists, therefore, it is important; it is important, otherwise, it would not exist; “This is the way God made us”; “It's natural.” Interfering with menstruation to the extent of suppressing it was considered almost sinful.

God made...the reproductive phase just perfect. When we're around 45...God ceases menstruation naturally when we are no longer able to be mothers. Therefore, I don't know if meddling with this is good. Not from the point of view of health, nor from the emotional, moral or religious point of view, nothing like that. I think we have to find ways of...living better with menstruation not of suppressing it.

Isn't there a right time for a woman to stop menstruating?...Then I think we should reach that age and let it stop by itself, shouldn't we?... .

A different group of women considered menstruation as a nuisance to which they were tied because of its significance to their lives, a price to be paid to achieve certain ends.

Why do we menstruate? Each one of us gave an opinion, but...who is right? Is there really any need for us to menstruate? It's nature but each individual is different... .

...Everybody tells us that becoming a woman [menarche] is great, that menstruation is the confirmation of not being pregnant, and that you have to go through it every month. I said: “All right: all this, for what?” Nobody has explained so far... .

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