

## Optimizing Post Partum Menstrual Health: Need of the Hour

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Postpartum period is the time of physical, emotional and social overhaul for the woman. The changes to which body has adapted in nine months, now wants to revert back to its pre gestational state. The most discomforting part about post-partum period is the discharge of lochia, which can come for around four to six weeks. Lochia is vaginal discharge coming from the cavity of uterus and mainly contains mucus, uterine lining debris and blood. For initial 1 - 5 days, this is red in color because the major component is blood, hence we call it lochia rubra. For next 5 - 7 days it becomes serosal (watery) in appearance and is called as lochia Serosa. Lochia alba, which is whitish in color comes for subsequent days, and is not much in amount. If perineal and local hygiene is not maintained during this period, it can result in serious and life threatening infections. Anaemia, hypertension and sepsis are the deadly trio killing mothers in humungous numbers in India.

Recently a hospital study in India found the MMR to be 4.21/1000 live births. 50 - 98% of maternal deaths were attributed to direct obstetric causes; hemorrhage, infection, and hypertensive disorders [1]. As per stated data from WHO, puerperal sepsis accounts for around 15% of the 500000 maternal deaths every year [2].

Not only mortality, but puerperal infections can cause a plethora of long term sinister health effects like PID, chronic pelvic pain, pelvic abscesses, infertility, menstrual disorders and Ashermann's syndrome [3]. According to Sample Registration System (SRS India, it was calculated that a whopping 11 - 16% of maternal deaths (from 1998 to 2003 survey) were due to puerperal sepsis [4].

It is not an uncommon practice to see women resorting to dirty clothes to manage their lochial discharge, as already this discharge is also presumed to be dirty! Some females are not allowed to enter their rooms after delivery, till this discharge is completely finished off and because of this, already stressed post-partum female is having additional discomfort. Recently, in a joint survey done by Pinkishe foundation and Society of Menstrual Disorders and Hygiene Management (SMDHM) on 230 postpartum females, 89% of the females preferred cloth for maintaining their lochial discharge over clean pads. Only 11% had access to clean sanitary products and 97% believed that lochia is impure blood and is dirty.

It is a common customary that the woman who has delivered the baby should take bath only after sixth day of the childbirth and verily, it adds to worsening perineal and menstrual health. In India, sepsis (infection) is the third leading cause of death. And sepsis in this case majorly occurs due to infection of the genito- urinary organs [1]. So, we encounter very high numbers of puerperal sepsis, shock and death, which is ironically highly preventable too! Not only this, persistent infection after this period may lead to irregular menstrual cycles, complete loss of menstruation, infertility and pelvic pain also. So, it's imperative to understand the importance of maintaining good hygiene during this period. Some points to remember for an optimizing PPMH are:



1. Availability of a clean absorbent, which can be a single use sanitary napkin or a clean, washed and dried cloth piece.
2. Early initiation of Breastfeeding helps to involute the uterus fast and aids in weight loss too.
3. Maintaining hygiene of genital area with clean water after each act of urination. There is absolutely no need to use soaps, deodorants, vaginal washes, intimate freshening creams or medicines like chlorhexidine. They should be taught to wash perineum from above downwards and not vice versa to prevent anal pathogens to genitor urinary area.
4. Care of perineotomy wound should be explained to the post-delivery mothers.
5. Importance of maintaining hydration is a must, as mothers become dehydrated easily because of post-partum diuresis in this time and enhanced requirement because of breastfeeding.
6. They should be educated about warning signs of infection like, noticing any foul smell, color change, fever or pain in lower side of abdomen, urinary and breast symptoms also.
7. The postpartum mothers should be instructed to resume mild daily activities. Prolonged immobilization in this period can result in a life threatening condition such as embolism.

Resumption of ovulation and menstrual bleed depends on many factors like lactation, nutrition, any contraception. Post-partum females should not use any plugging menstruation sanitation devices like tampons, rolled sanitary pads or menstrual cups. But as soon as menstruation resumes, any of the clean sanitation option can be used for maintaining menstrual hygiene. More awareness is required for maintaining immediate postpartum perineal hygiene keeping in mind that health and hygiene go hand in hand.

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