

Periods and girls with autism spectrum disorder

Your daughter with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) will go through lots of changes in puberty, just as other girls do. One of the most significant milestones is her first period. It's a sign that the physical changes in her body have only a couple of years to go.

Most girls get their first period when they're between 11 and 14½, but anywhere from 9-16 years is considered normal. If a girl has a major growth spurt and has grown some underarm hair, periods are likely to be just around the corner.

ASD doesn't affect when girls start their periods.

When to start talking about periods – and what to say

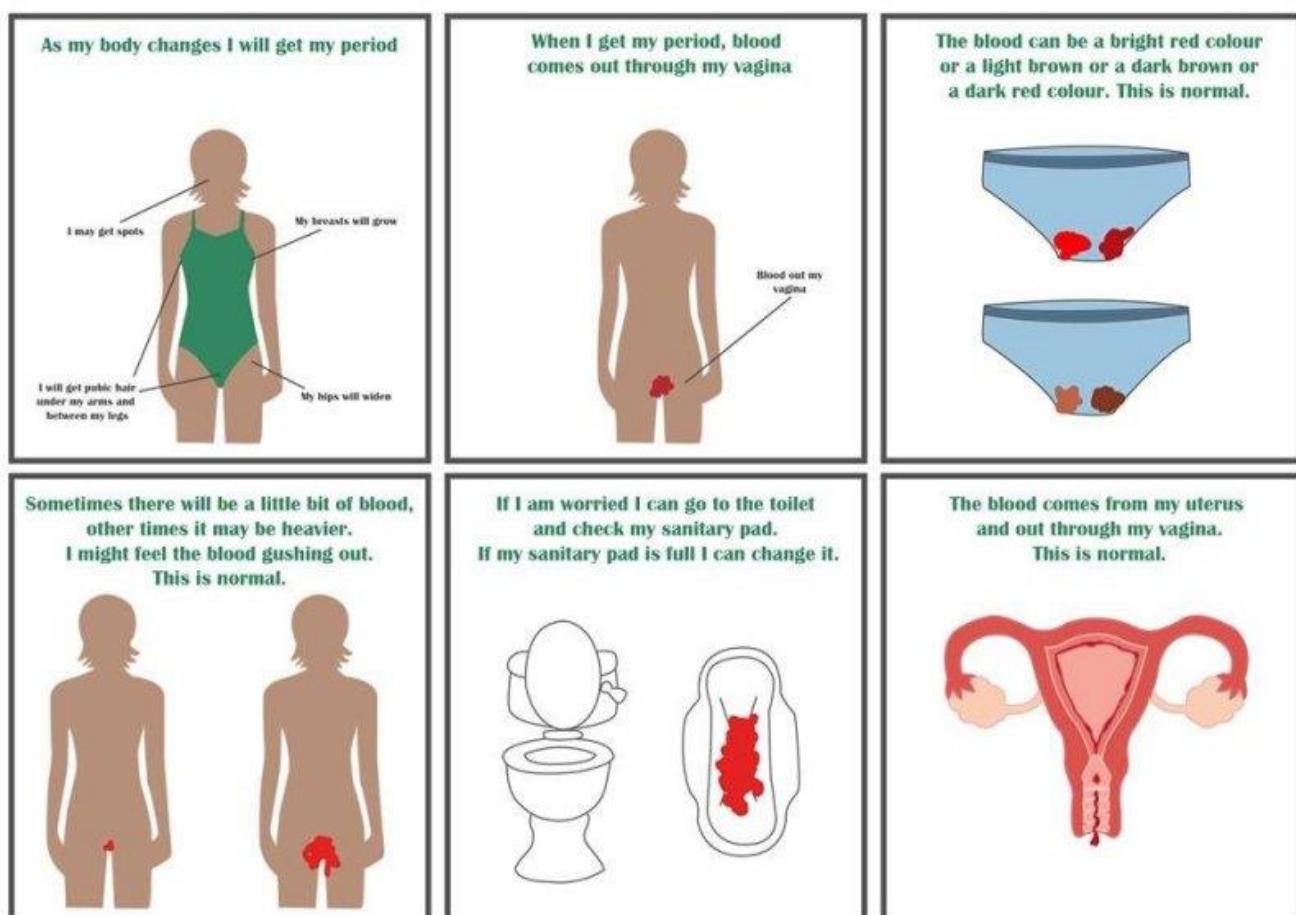
Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often need longer to adjust to and understand changes in their lives than typically developing children do. And because you can't know exactly when your daughter will get her first period, it's a good idea to **start talking about it early**.

Also, if girls don't know or understand what periods are, they could be frightened that something is wrong with them or that they're hurt. It can help to make sure your daughter is prepared.

Social Stories™ can help you and your daughter get ready for periods. Here's an example.

Social Story: I will begin to have my period

- As my body changes I will get my period.
- When I get my period, blood comes out through my vagina.
- I will need to use a cloth, pad or tampon so my clothes don't get stained.
- Most girls and women have a period every 28 days. Sometimes it might be sooner or later. This is OK.
- A few days before I get my period, I might feel more upset about things. I might feel angry, I might feel sad, I might feel frustrated, or I might feel other emotions. Feeling this way is normal and usually stops when my period starts.
- My breasts, stomach and the lower part of my back might feel sore at this time. This is normal.
- Putting a hot water bottle on my stomach and having some pain relief medication can help me feel less sore.
- I might have my period for 4-7 days. It might be shorter. This is OK.
- If my period goes for longer than seven days, I will talk to an adult who cares about me.



Practical preparations for periods

Your daughter will also need to **know what pads and tampons look like and how to use them**. You could go to the supermarket and choose some different pads or tampons together. You know your child best, so you'll be able to decide whether pads or tampons will be best for her.

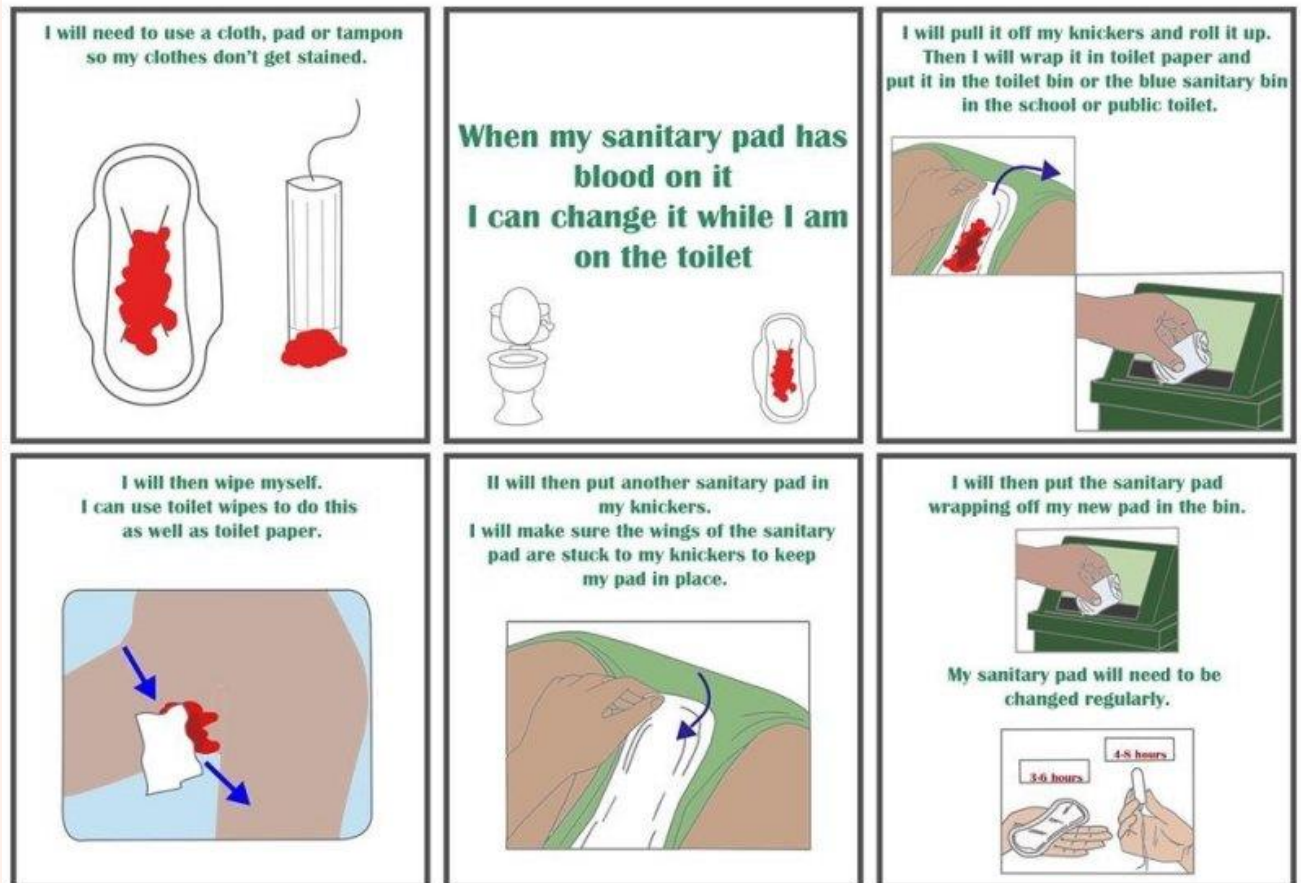
If your daughter keeps her pads and tampons in a particular drawer in her bedroom, or in the bathroom, she'll know where they are when she needs them.

If your daughter uses visual supports, a visual schedule that shows the steps involved in changing a reusable cloth, pad or tampon can be useful. It will also help if you show your daughter where to attach the cloth or sanitary pad – you could mark her underwear to show where it goes.

Once your daughter's periods have started, you could show her how to use a calendar or an app to plan when her period is due.

You might need to tell your daughter **who to go to at school if her periods start there** – for example, the school nurse.

Girls of any age can use tampons, but it can take some time and practice to get used to them. It's probably easier to manage and less overwhelming for your daughter if she starts with pads before tampons. When your daughter is first starting with tampons, the type that come with applicators can be easier to use.



Problems with Periods for Autistic Females or those who have Sensory Processing Disorder

Communication and Emotions

As well as difficulties **processing** all the changes those who are Autistic or have Sensory Issue many struggle with **communicating**. This can be a difficult time especially if she finds it hard to regulate her hormones. A good way to help with this is to discuss what a period is and why we have them.

Talk about the menstrual cycle, explaining that it happens to all women. Plot on a calendar the different stages (menstruating/ovulation) this will help her to keep track of when her

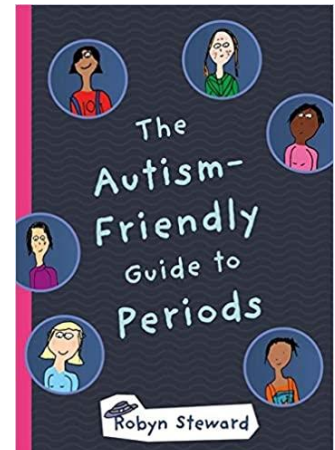
period is due. Make sure you include the fact that they may have increased discharge on the lead up to their periods, and then on days in-between periods. Not only talk about how long the average length of a period will last each month, how much blood may be lost, and also how long she is likely to have periods in her life. It may seem strange to introduce the menopause before the first period but it might help them to have an idea of the time frame

You can help your daughter to manage the emotional symptoms of PMS by **letting her know that she might:**

- feel cross and cranky
- have trouble concentrating
- feel depressed
- feel sleepy.

Pictures to illustrate these feelings might be useful.

Useful book by Robyn Steward, who has Autism. Available on Amazon.



Sensory Difficulties and Periods

- Of course there may be new sensory difficulties which arise due to her periods. It may be that she cannot cope with the feel of discharge or blood, or the sensation of a pad in her pants/tampon inside her. This could lead on to poor hygiene, especially if this is already a problem. You need to explore all the many types of products available (towels/tampons/menstrual cups/reusable pads/reusable pants), to discover if there's a particular one they are more comfortable with.
- It may be that the different products have varying smells – therefore it may be a case that reusable pads would be the best option as you could wash them with the regular laundry detergent that they are used to.
- Menstrual cups (a silicon cup which is inserted into a vagina to catch blood and blood clots. It is easy to empty when full and is cleanable and reusable (and internal).
- Cotton reusable/washable pads and period underwear (which is very comfortable - they also make boxer style short ones which would be very useful for people who menstruate but may not identify as female).

Your daughter may want to use toilet wipes or a flannel for cleaning themselves after they have been to the toilet if they cannot deal with the blood.

Explain that without using them that the blood could leak through their clothes and make them uncomfortable. That if they suffer with heavy blood loss that this could still happen and it may be an idea to carry around spare knickers and sanitary products with them. But also make them aware of how and where to buy products themselves. It may be that it is the **visual sight of blood** and so **dark sanitary pants** may be the only solution.

Together you could make a “monthlies” box for the bathroom with all the things she needs. Or order a subscription box for her.

Personal Hygiene

Puberty in general is a time when personal hygiene needs addressing and it may be that they struggle with the odours that come with periods. Again which type of sanitary products they use may help with this, as well as the right kind of spray to mask the smell.

It may seem obvious but she needs to be made aware of the importance of washing her hands after changing her sanitary wear and of course they also need to know when and how to change and the correct method of disposing (including how to wrap up disposable pads and place them in the bins provided and what they can do if there aren't any available) or cleaning their sanitary products – and that they are not flushed down the toilet. Talk about the frequency because this could be the fullness or the time – even if a pad has not got a lot of blood on it, it needs changing frequently, or it will start to smell.

If reusable products are being used, make sure they know where to put them when they have finished with them (maybe have a wet bag that they can carry around and a wet bucket in the bathroom). But be prepared that they may still hide them – you just need to make sure this situation is as least embarrassing as possible.

Maybe even teach her how to do her own washing, with her own wash hamper (obviously depending on her age) so that she does not worry what others think (and depending on her capabilities). Advice on rinsing them or how to treat stains.

Social Rules

Obviously talking about how we take care of sanitary products after they are used are part of the social rules of our society – so you may want to explain this as a reason why as well as for hygiene reasons. But also mention about the vocabulary we use when talking about periods – plus how there is a time and place to talk about menstruation but that there are boundaries and appropriate social etiquette.

That all females have most likely had periods at some point in their lives and it is nothing to be ashamed about. A lot of us have been caught short with unexpectedly “coming on” and not had the right products to deal with it. In this case for a short while some tissue paper may help, or some toilets sell products in machines – or another female can be asked if she has anything that could be “borrowed” (this is the term used but they do not actually want it back!

This will also include getting the attention of a member of staff if at school or college to help deal with any issues. If this may be the case it may be worth speaking to the school and see if they will help support them.