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Menstrual health literacy - A crucial yet unclear concept

Abstract

Menstrual health literacy *(or menstrual literacy)* is widely argued to contribute to menstrual health outcomes and self-management of symptoms. From menarche to menopause, facets of health literacy are considered insufficient, leaving many individuals without key knowledge and skills to manage their health in the context of widespread menstrual stigma. Despite a high frequency of studies calling for global improvements to menstrual health literacy rates, there is no consensus on what this term "means" in research or practice. This commentary outlines key differences across current definitions of menstrual health literacy, with reference to an existing framework of health literacy, and raises questions on how best to structure a universal definition to meet needs from menarche and beyond.

Keywords

Menstrual health literacy, menstrual health, menstrual stigma, health communication

Introduction

Menstruation, defined as the cyclic bleeding from the uterus that is governed by natural hormone changes from unfertilised ovulation,[1,2] is a common experience, affecting an estimated 2.1 billion individuals worldwide.[3] Despite being a shared experience for roughly one quarter of human population,[4] girls, women, and all individuals with a menstrual cycle are often tasked with managing their menstrual health with limited information, skills, and support.[5] Many individuals report reaching menarche, *the first 'bleed'*,[6] with limited or no knowledge of what to expect[7]; a common gap in what is known as 'menstrual health literacy'.[8] Crucially, managing menstrual health during the reproductive years and beyond goes further than accessing and using appropriate products. It can include coping with distressing mental health symptoms,[9] managing in environments lacking privacy and sanitation,[10] and navigating a stigmatised phenomenon with socially-mandated discretion.[11] From menarche and into menopause, many individuals are affected by limited access to knowledge, understanding, and skills in managing changes in their menstrual experiences.[12,13]

Consequently, a common call to action to support individuals with a menstrual cycle is to improve rates of menstrual health literacy.[8] Despite positioning menstrual health literacy as an urgent health need, this term and its definition remain ambiguous and inconsistently used. Different definitions have led to the design of distinct measures of menstrual health literacy.[14,15] A lack of consensus, however, limits general understanding of the concept, as well as raising several scientific issues, including difficulties assessing the concept and reduced capacity to compare and replicate studies. To ensure individuals can be empowered to manage menstrual health across the lifespan and that research and clinical work can effectively target deficits in this area, a standardised definition of menstrual health literacy is urgently needed. In this commentary article, we explore differences across current usages of 'menstrual health literacy' and raise reflective questions to guide the direction for developing a unified, clear, and practical definition.

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Current Definitions of Menstrual Health Literacy

Nutbeam's framework of health literacy[16] is a useful lens through which to view the core components of a possible 'gold-standard' menstrual health literacy definition. This framework positions health literacy as a dynamic concept, placing the individual as an active participant in forming capacities to better manage their health within their environment, which in turn also shapes health literacy development.[16] The framework comprises three levels of health literacy that build upon one another; functional health literacy, interactive health literacy, and critical health literacy[16] (See Table 1 for a description and examples of each of these three levels).

Looking specifically at menstrual health literacy, a PubMed search revealed 57 peer-reviewed articles with the terms 'menstrual health literacy' ($k = 44$) or 'menstrual literacy' ($k = 13$) used in titles or abstracts between 2019 and July 2026. Though not all articles included a definition, some presented new definitions[15,18] or used existing general definitions of 'health literacy' and applied those directly to menstruation.[8,19] A selection of both strategies is displayed in Table 2. All included definitions are drawn from peer-reviewed research bar one, which is extracted from a proposed national curriculum for England focused on menstrual literacy.[20] Using Nutbeam's[16] delineation of health literacy levels, it is clear that all definitions account for functional health literacy, but differ in whether and/or how they address facets of interactive and critical health literacy. Moreover, differences in relation to how menstrual health literacy is conceptualised are also evident. Extensive comparison between definitions is beyond the scope of this article; however, clear differences provide us with an opportunity to reflect on which directions may best serve the interest of menstruators.

Reflecting on Definitional Differences

Where menstrual health literacy 'starts' and 'ends'

In the definitions represented in Table 2, there are clear conceptual differences with respect to the definitions' central focus. Roux's[14] chosen term and definition of 'ovulatory-menstrual health literacy' centres ovulation, while this event is not explicitly mentioned in others (though it is likely indirectly part of the functional health literacy aspect). Consequently, Roux's[14] focus on ovulation shifts our starting point from menstruation itself and centres ovulation as its driving force. It is noteworthy that this chronological approach contrasts with the medical convention of using the first day of bleeding as the 'start' of the monthly menstrual cycle.[23] Roux's framing, however, clarifies a specific area of neglect in general understanding of the menstruating body; despite the importance of ovulation to menstruation, over half of individuals surveyed in the United States did not understand ovulation and when it occurs.[24]

On a practical note, however, use of 'ovulatory-menstrual health literacy', as a substitute for 'menstrual (health) literacy', may limit term-based congruence with the now well-recognised term 'menstrual health'. Menstrual health is defined as '*a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity in relation to the*

Table 1. Description of health literacy levels and examples in the menstrual health context.

Health Literacy Level	Description	Examples for menstrual health
Functional	A foundation of health literacy, involving the ability to read, comprehend and use basic and factual health information to perform health-related tasks[16]	• Understanding why menstruation occurs from learning in school • Using appropriate menstrual products by following the product guidance
Interactive	Building on functional health literacy with the ability to acquire information from different health sources, to apply information to new circumstances, and to engage with others about health practices and concerns[16]	• Approaching a general practitioner and querying newly experienced and potentially perimenopausal symptoms • Researching management methods for Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder and choosing a method together with a general practitioner based on desired effects and own preferences
Critical	Building on both functional and interactive health literacy with the abilities to reflect on health information and assess it for quality and reliability and to engage in social or political actions for health advocacy[16,17]	• Questioning online wellness trends, like 'cycle-syncing', which may promote unevidenced behaviours to restore menstrual health • Advocating for political change to ensure period products are freely available to all who need them in public spaces (e.g., the Period Products Act of 2020 in Scotland).

Table 2. An overview of current menstrual (health) literacy definitions.

	Term	Definition Used	First Author and Citation	Year
1	Menstrual Literacy	"A baseline of knowledge and skills for understanding anatomical and biological facts of menstruation, caring for the menstruating body and completing menstrual care tasks"	Eschler[18]	2019
2	Menstrual Health Literacy	*Health literacy:* "The degree to which individuals can understand, obtain and process health information and services" - *adopted from*[21]	Holmes[8]	2021
3	Menstrual Health Literacy	*Health literacy:* "The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health-related decisions" - *adopted from*[22]	Armour[19]	2021
4	Menstrual Literacy	"A holistic model which incorporates • **body literacy** (understanding how our bodies work and the physical and emotional changes involved in puberty and menstruation) • **product literacy** (knowing what products are available, including a full range of reusable menstrual products) • **media literacy** (the skills and abilities to critically analyse the messages received about periods from the media and to be able to identify when shame and taboos are promoted as a way of securing specific goals) • **cultural literacy** (the ability to understand and critically analyse the cultural norms that exist in all cultures, including your own, that promote certain negative messages about menstruation)"	Quint[20]	2022
5	Ovulatory Menstrual Health Literacy	"the discipline of applying ovulatory-menstrual cycle knowledge and skills to maintain personal health by reference to ovulation which drives menstruation and with due cognizance of life stage and/or stressors and confident engagement and active co-operation with healthcare providers to restore good ovulatory menstrual health, as needed"	Roux[14]	2023
6	Menstrual Health Literacy	"the cognitive and social skills informing an individual's motivation and ability to understand, apply, and communicate accurate information about menstruation, in order to maintain and improve menstrual and general wellbeing throughout the menstrual cycle."	Gallivan[15]	2026

menstrual cycle'.[25] As menstrual health literacy is considered crucial to empower individuals to manage their menstrual health, close alignment with the existing 'menstrual health' term seems beneficial in creating a standardised definition. Even so, Roux's[14] emphasis on ovulation raises the question of whether individuals are better served by understanding the chronological, biological process underlying the cycle, not just that which is visible.

Discussion of the starting points leads to another key question about what the concept encompasses and where menstrual health literacy 'ends'. Specifically, should the concept represent individual menstrual cycles only or zoom out to account for the full trajectory of reproductive life into menopause, which marks the end of all menstrual cycles? Most highlighted definitions apply to individual menstrual cycles only.[15,18,20] No definition explicitly opts for a lifespan approach to include menstrual changes at pregnancy, post-partum, and menopause, for instance. Roux,[14] however, does state that 'ovulatory-menstrual health literacy' includes acknowledgement of the individual's 'life stage' without explicit reference to key stages. It is noteworthy that many individuals are ill-equipped for key stages related to menstrual and reproductive health as they arise, including menarche,[19] pregnancy,[13] and menopause.[12] One all-encompassing definition, accounting for all stages relevant to menstrual health throughout the lifespan, may be a start to addressing these gaps as they arise. This approach may be particularly effective if it results in the creation of age-appropriate information throughout the lifespan.

Representation of interactive and critical capacities

While all definitions in Table 2 account for aspects of functional health literacy, they vary in the detail authors provide about interactive and critical health literacy capacities. One capacity relevant to both interactive and critical levels is communication, as highlighted in Table 1, which places the individual as an active participant in both receiving and relaying information.[16] Explicit reference to communication skills to manage menstrual health are only included – and to varying degrees - in the definitions of Roux[14] and Gallivan.[15] Gallivan and colleagues[15] conceptualise menstrual health literacy as a

mix of both cognitive and social skills that ultimately affects an individual's ability to communicate accurate information about menstruation. Conversely, Roux's[14] definition accounts for confident and active two-way communication with healthcare providers specifically, with implicit reference to communication with intimate partners regarding fertility.

Though different, the inclusion of some aspect of communication within both definitions highlights the reality that talking about periods can often be difficult. Menstruation is an infamously controversial topic; due to menstrual stigma, many individuals avoid the word itself, replacing it with more innocuous euphemisms.[26] Barriers in communicating about menstruation, menopause and women's health more generally are also present on social media, the most widespread tool of modern communication. Recent reports have revealed ongoing censorship of posts containing words like 'menstruation', 'menopause' across social media sites.[27] To be empowered to manage menstrual health in this landscape, the ability to confidently and accurately communicate about a stigmatised experience is a key interactive capacity to highlight in a comprehensive definition of menstrual health literacy.

Another capacity relevant to higher levels of health literacy is the ability to critically assess information within a stigmatising environment. This capacity can be challenging to acquire, as menstrual stigma has resulted in active discrimination against menstruators across the globe.[20] Stigma can lead to damaging menstrual experiences, from practices of exclusion from daily activities when bleeding,[28] enforced isolation from family and safe living spaces,[29] to premenstrual women being accused of behaving 'hormonally' and unable to make sound decisions.[30] Stigma can also manifest subtly, such as through dismissal by healthcare professionals[31] when seeking guidance about difficult symptoms. Despite the impact of stigma, it is not explicitly targeted in the definitions from peer-reviewed research. It is, however, included in Quint's[20] definition, devised as part of the Period Positive® movement and which accounts for two specific sources of stigmatising information; media and culture. This definition places a firm emphasis on the impact of stigma and the need to equip individuals who menstruate with critical appraisal skills for potential misinformation and negative messaging across different environments.

Due to stigma, becoming 'menstrual health literate' is an uphill struggle to access resources to form even functional menstrual health literacy skills.[11] If stigma remains under-addressed, individuals will continue to face the challenge of navigating misinformation about periods and their health,[32] making critical appraisal of information difficult in situations where taboos may minimise the availability of evidence-based information. Social media has further enabled the spread of misinformation, such as platforming fake wellness cures for health conditions.[33] Considering the pervasive effect of menstrual stigma on forming the building blocks of health literacy, specific recognition of the need to tackle menstrual stigma and simultaneously equip individuals to recognise it, discuss it, and challenge it may be warranted within a definition of menstrual health literacy.

Conclusion

Improvements in menstrual health literacy light the way for the achievement of menstrual health and empowerment.[25] However, given the lack of a clear and standardised definition of the term 'menstrual health literacy', necessary knowledge and skills relevant to key stages of menstrual and reproductive life may fall through the cracks. For researchers and clinicians, in turn, this means limitations in the collective ability to measure and target the concept to meaningfully address pressing needs in the global population.

At present, individuals who menstruate are tasked with swimming upstream against the impact of stigma and harmful social norms[11] and being bombarded with health misinformation,[32] with limited education or evidence-based tools to manage their menstrual health.[8,19] To properly institute frameworks and initiatives to raise current standards of knowledge and skills related to menstrual, reproductive, and menopausal experiences, as well as supporting individuals to continue developing their capacities, a critical next step is the creation of a standardised definition. While several open questions remain, we believe discussions will benefit from considering aspects of stigma identification and dismantlement, as well as key stages in the lifespan relevant to menstrual and reproductive health.

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Author note

Please note the term 'menstrual health literacy' is used throughout for consistency. We acknowledge that this concept is represented using different terms across the research field.

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