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# Period Pieces

How TV Shapes Teens'  
Understanding of Menstruation



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## Executive summary

While teens engage with various sources of media — such as gaming, social media, and general internet browsing — television is still one of the most frequent types of media they are exposed to on a daily basis.<sup>1</sup>

Given television's strong hold on teen audiences, researchers have invested substantial effort in examining its effects. And research consistently shows television has the power to directly influence teens' behaviors, attitudes, and social learning. For example, various studies illustrate that exposure to prosocial media is related to higher levels of prosocial behavior and empathy, and lower levels of aggression among viewers.<sup>2</sup> Evidence suggests that identification with favorite television characters is associated with a higher probability of young people adopting comparable workplace aspirations and values.<sup>3</sup> These findings demonstrate that what is shown on screen has the power to influence real-world behaviors and attitudes among young audiences. These are just a few studies that demonstrate the power television portrayals have on young audiences.

This report examines how television shapes public understanding of menstruation — an issue often treated as confusing, embarrassing, or hard to talk about — and whether media portrayals reinforce or challenge prevailing stigma.

Menstruation has long been treated as shameful or embarrassing.<sup>4</sup> Girls and women are encouraged to keep menstruation private.<sup>5</sup> Despite menstruation being relevant to all genders in all kinds of

contexts — such as sex, conceiving, and menopause — discussing menstruation with men is even more discouraged.<sup>6</sup> Psychologists explain that such an emphasis on secrecy around menstruation reinforces the idea that menstruation is shameful or embarrassing.<sup>7</sup>

This study examines how real-world teens and parents perceive menstruation, how often it occurs in television scripts from 1950 to 2018, and the nature of how it appears in teen programs in 2018 and 2024. Using survey data as well as textual and content analyses, we draw the following key findings:

- ◆ **Teenage girls and boys get information from unique sources.** Nearly all (95%) of teen girls learn about menstruation from their mothers, and 52% learn from friends. Teen boys rely more on school (68%) but also their mothers (47%). Entertainment media is a minor source, but teen boys cite it twice as often as teen girls (16% compared with 8%).
- ◆ **Fathers are increasingly part of the conversation.** Altogether, 19% of teens say they learned about menstruation from their fathers (26% of boys; 10% of girls) — a major jump from their parents' generation, of whom 4% say they learned about it from their fathers.
- ◆ **Parents and teens recall TV episodes about menstruation to be rare.** Only 8% of parents and teens say they “often” or “somewhat often” see menstruation in shared media — far lower than other topics, like “plans for after high school” (53% parents; 48% teens) or “mental health” (46% parents; 51% teens).
- ◆ **Media portrayals of menstruation do spark family conversations — when they appear.** Altogether, 45% of parents and 40% of teens say menstruation on screen has prompted a discussion about the topic. Statistical analysis shows that seeing menstruation depicted or discussed on screen significantly increases the likelihood of parent-teen conversations.
- ◆ **Parents and teens want period storylines that feel healthier and more grounded.** Nearly half of teens (48%) and a clear majority of parents (57%) want depictions that aren't traumatic or embarrassing; 55% in both groups want fewer jokes framing periods as gross.
- ◆ **Teens respond positively when portrayals are relatable and realistic.** In open-ended responses, teens praised depictions showing cramps, mood swings, anxiety about leaks, or supportive conversations, noting these moments make them feel “normal,” “understood,” and “less embarrassed.”

Teens rarely see menstruation in media and mostly learn about it from parents, school, and friends. When menstruation does appear on screen, it prompts family conversations, and both parents and teens want more realistic, non-embarrassing portrayals that reflect everyday experiences.

- ◆ **Menstruation is rarely referenced in TV transcripts.** Across 59,313 English-language episode transcripts from 1950–2018, only 1.2% (688 episodes) included any menstruation-related terms.

- ◆ **Mentions have increased in recent decades.** References were virtually nonexistent through the 1960s, began to appear sporadically in the 1970s and 1980s, and rose most sharply in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s.
- ◆ **Overall usage is trending upward.** Product mentions and direct language increased across each decade since the 1970s, suggesting a gradual shift toward more open and explicit references on screen. The occurrence of euphemisms in transcripts for the past two decades are largely steady (but not increasing).

Menstruation has been largely absent from TV dialogue historically, appearing in just 1.2% of episodes from 1950–2018. References increased notably beginning in the 1990s, with more direct language and product mentions over time, suggesting a gradual shift toward openness rather than increased reliance on euphemisms.

- ◆ **Menstruation references in TV made for teens are extremely rare.** Out of 313 teen-focused episodes analyzed, only 6% ( $n = 18$ ) included any mention of menstruation, totaling 24 references. Most references were minor plot points.
- ◆ **Menstruation references occur slightly less in 2024 than in 2018.** Of the 24 references, 58% occurred in 2018 episodes and 42% in 2024 episodes, suggesting little change in frequency.
- ◆ **Contextual placement is limited.** Half of menstruation scenes occurred in bathrooms or locker rooms, while the other half appeared in other settings.
- ◆ **Language is mostly explicit; euphemisms are minimal.** Characters used terms like “period,” “tampon,” and “bleeding,” with euphemisms such as “shark week” or “monthly visitor” appearing infrequently.
- ◆ **Stereotypes are mostly avoided.** Only two characters were portrayed as overly emotional due to menstruation, and some narratives reframed menstruation positively or playfully (e.g., using a tampon to stop a nosebleed or to help read a magic spell).
- ◆ **Opportunities for integration are frequently missed.** While 47% of episodes featured sex, 44% featured sports, 18% featured pregnancy, 4% featured puberty, and 1% featured contraception, menstruation was largely absent from these contexts where it could naturally appear.

Menstruation is largely absent from teen TV, appearing in only 6% of episodes, with no increase from 2018 compared to 2024. When it does appear, references are brief, but explicit and rarely stereotypical, sometimes framed positively. However, its near-total absence is especially notable given how often related contexts like sex, sports, and pregnancy appear in teen TV shows.



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## Introduction

### How has menstruation shown up on screen?

While teens engage with various sources of media — such as gaming, social media, and Internet browsing — television is the most frequent type of media that they consume on a daily basis.<sup>8</sup> Because of the popularity of television among this age demographic, social scientists have devoted vast amounts of research to understand how television affects teens. And research consistently shows television narratives have the power to directly influence teens' behaviors, attitudes, and social learning.

This study is interested in portrayals of menstruation in television made for teens and how those portrayals affect those viewers. Menstruation is both common and consequential, yet persistent taboos have left many with limited and inaccurate knowledge of reproductive health.<sup>9</sup> Menstruation is occasionally treated as something that should be hidden, which can prompt women to reduce social contact when they are menstruating. Experts note that this dynamic makes menstruation less visible and further stigmatizes it.<sup>10</sup> A recent survey suggests most women in the United States are not prepared for their first period, with 1 in 5 women saying they did not understand what was happening to them when they first experienced it. Women who felt less prepared were more likely to report a negative first period

experience. And although they are relatively comfortable discussing menstruation with healthcare providers, they are far less so with partners, friends, or coworkers.<sup>11</sup>

Experts agree that knowledge about menstruation among young people is limited but that portrayals in popular culture are central to their learning.<sup>12</sup> But existing studies that have analyzed menstruation portrayals in media find that period stigma persists. One analysis of three films with period plotlines and four TV series with an episode about periods concluded that menstruation is often a vehicle for characterizing female characters as “flawed,” overly emotional, and/or hormonal.<sup>13</sup>

But an analysis of two films and 10 episodes that featured menstruation over several decades concluded that these storylines were also vehicles for mother–daughter bonding. However, that same study found fathers on screen to be largely excluded or avoidant when their daughters were experiencing their first period, which may perpetuate stigma around menstruation.<sup>14</sup>

In another analysis of nearly 60 scripts that mentioned menstruation and menstruation-related phrases over several decades concluded that menstruation tropes — such as pregnancy scares, distress, fear, and shame about menstruation — don't vary greatly from the 1970s to the 2020s. However, over time, more of these scripts that included menstruation were directed or written by women, and stories about periods also increased with time.<sup>15</sup>

Building on these findings, this new study examines how often menstruation has been portrayed in television by sampling more broadly. We also add to this work with a survey of parent–teen pairs to better understand the impact of portrayals on screen.

Our first objective is to investigate how teens (ages 13 to 18) and their parents perceive menstruation and whether television storylines can spark discussion, using a survey of 423 parent–teen pairs in the United States, fielded by YouGov. Building on these insights, our second objective is to trace the evolution of menstruation in television scripts from 1950 to 2018 through a textual analysis. Finally, our third objective is to examine how often and in what ways menstruation is shown in television programs produced for teenage viewers, using a content analysis of 313 programs representative of the 2018 and 2024 television seasons, based on data from Luminate Film & TV, by Variety.

Altogether, we leverage these findings to form recommendations aimed to destigmatize menstruation, increase period visibility, and support healthier conversations about teen menstrual health.

**Experts agree that knowledge about menstruation among young people is limited but that portrayals in popular culture are central to their learning.**



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## Data and methodology

To assess the representation and general understanding of menstruation on screen, this report presents findings from:

- ◆ A survey of parents and their teenage children in the U.S., administered in 2025, by YouGov.
- ◆ A longitudinal analysis of menstruation phrases and words in U.S.-based television transcripts from 1950 to 2018.
- ◆ A content analysis of teen television programs from 2018 and 2024.

### Parent-teen pairs survey design

This study presents findings from a survey of teens (ages 13 to 18) and their parents about their experiences with and exposure to menstruation, as well as the role media may play in those experiences and exposure. This survey was administered from July 25 to September 28, 2025, by YouGov. A total of 423 parent-teen pairs were surveyed. Teens and their parents independently completed the survey. Demographics of recruited survey participants are provided in Appendix A. The survey included questions that tapped into three themes:

1. Knowledge of menstruation.
2. Parent and teen conversations about menstruation and the effects of those conversations.
3. What audiences want to see depicted on screen regarding menstruation.

### Longitudinal transcript database

This report presents a bird's-eye view of menstruation topics on TV over a long history. To understand how depictions of menstruation on screen have evolved, this study includes a longitudinal analysis of

menstruation phrases and words in U.S.-based television transcripts for scripted TV from 1950 to 2018. We used the TV Corpus database,<sup>16</sup> which is a dataset of 325 million words from over 75,000 TV shows. This analysis is limited to shows that were in the English language and originated in the U.S., which totals 59,313 episodes. Unfortunately, the database has not been updated since 2018, but this time frame will still provide a useful set of benchmarks for understanding how scripted TV has evolved on this topic.

To measure the evolution of menstruation on TV, we first identified key phrases and words used to discuss this topic. Second, we searched scripts for these phrases and terms to produce a dataset of excerpts. These excerpts included 100 characters of dialogue before and after the key phrase or word. Third, each excerpt that was flagged with a key phrase or word was checked using a large language model to ensure the mention was indeed a menstruation reference. Before completing step three, two researchers independently hand-coded 100 times where the model said the reference in the excerpt was about menstruation, and 100 times where the model said it was not. The agreement between the two researchers and the LLM was 92% and 94%, respectively. The agreement between the two researchers was 97% for each.

The list of key phrases and words were a mix of innuendos, products, and unambiguous terms: my period(s), your period(s), her period(s), menses, menstruation, menstrual, aunt flo (and other spellings), time of the month, tampon(s), pad(s), sanitary napkin(s), Kotex, Tampax, liner(s), feminine hygiene, girl flu, Diva Cup, code red, shark week, and lady business.

## Content analysis of teen TV in 2018 and 2024

To understand how often menstruation comes up in recent media, we carried out a content analysis of shows made for teens in 2018 and 2024 to assess changes over this time period. Content analysis is a systematic method for quantifying themes and patterns across programs.

To create the sample, we identified U.S. teen series from the 2018 and 2024 television seasons, using Luminate Film & TV, by Variety, and we focused on shows tagged as “teen,” “coming-of-age,” “high school comedy,” and “high school drama” across broadcast, cable, and major streaming platforms.<sup>17</sup> From 45 series and 589 episodes, we randomly selected a representative sample of episodes,<sup>18</sup> resulting in a final sample of 313 episodes.<sup>19</sup>

Our analysis of these episodes occurred in two phases. First, analysts independently watched the episodes for the presence or absence of period references.<sup>20</sup> Next, episodes with period references were qualitatively examined for patterns and trends in how menstruation was portrayed on screen.

TABLE 1

### Final sample of teen TV episodes for 2018 and 2024

Year	Number of Episodes
2018	197
2024	116
Total	313

Source: Luminate Film & TV, by Variety



# Findings

## Survey findings

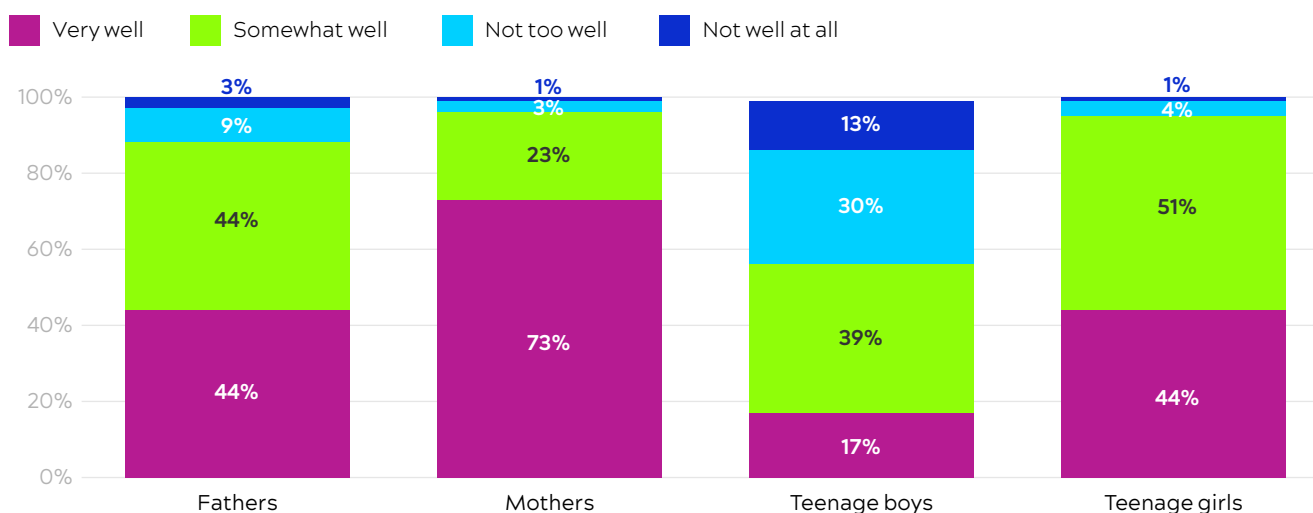
This first section summarizes insights from a national survey of teenagers (ages 13–18) and their parents, focusing on their experiences with menstruation, how often they encounter it, and the extent to which media shapes those encounters. Fielded by YouGov between July 25 and September 28, 2025, the survey gathered responses from 423 parent–teen pairs, with each completing the questionnaire separately. Participant demographics appear in Appendix A. The survey explored three core areas:

1. Menstruation knowledge.
2. Parent–teen discussions about menstruation and the perceived influence of those conversations.
3. Audience preferences for on–screen content related to menstruation.

A majority of parents have a good understanding of menstruation. Specifically, 92% of parents report understanding menstruation “somewhat well” or “very well.”

But mothers are significantly more likely than fathers to report understanding menstruation “very well” (73% compared with 44%). Among teen boys, just 17% say they understand menstruation “very well,” compared with 44% of teen girls who say the same. (See Figure 1.) Although most parents believe they

FIGURE 1

**Participant responses for knowledge of menstruation**

Note. Question wording: “How well do you feel like you understand menstruation?” Response-option scale ranged from 1 to 4. Columns may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

have a good understanding of menstruation, many believe common myths associated with periods. For example, 72% of parents believe that women’s periods sync when they spend time together, and 66% believe that doctors recommend going to bed without a tampon. However, both of these are myths; women’s cycles do not sync when they are around each other,<sup>21</sup> and doctors generally state that tampons can be worn safely overnight, if used as directed.<sup>22</sup>

From whom do teens learn about menstruation? Unsurprisingly, teen boys and girls learn about menstruation from unique sources. Nearly all (95%) of teen girls learn about menstruation from their mothers, and 52% say they learn about it from their friends. Among teen boys, 68% learn about menstruation in classes at school, and 47% learn about it from their mothers. (See Figure 2).

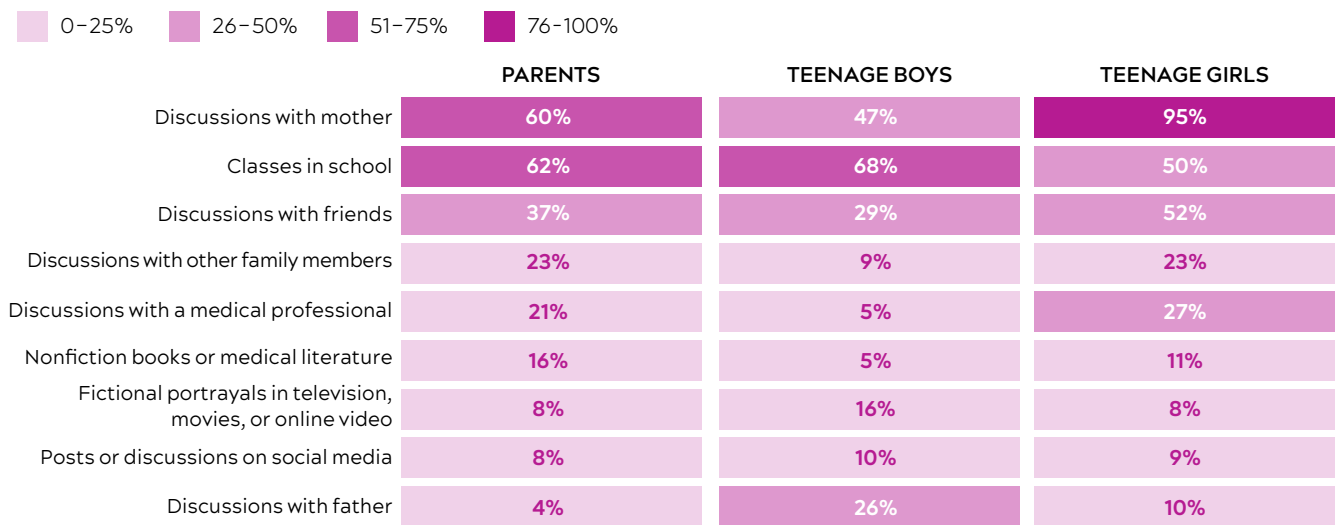
Entertainment media is an uncommon source for learning about menstruation but is more common for teenage boys than teenage girls: 16% of teen boys say they learned about menstruation from scripted TV/movies, compared with just 8% of teen girls. (See Figure 2).

Additionally, 26% of boys and 10% of girls say they learned about menstruation from their fathers (19% of all teens surveyed). This is a big shift from their parents’ generation — for whom only 4% report having learned about the topic through conversation with their fathers. This suggests more fathers today are having these conversations with their children, particularly their sons. (See Figure 2).

**Unsurprisingly, teen boys and girls learn about menstruation from unique sources.**

FIGURE 2

Teen responses for where they get knowledge about menstruation



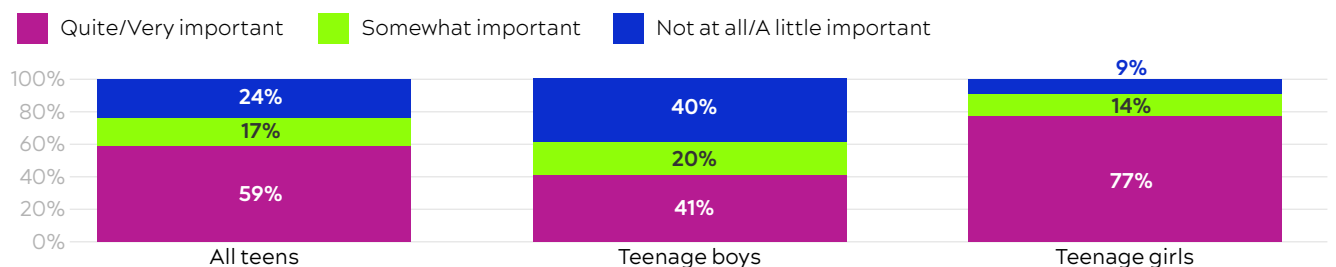
Note. Question wording: “How have you learned about menstruation?” Asterisk indicates a statistically significant difference between teenage girls’ and boys’ exposure to sources. We also asked about documentaries, social media influencers, fiction books, and podcasts, but less than 10% of all groups selected these options. Teenage girls are significantly more likely than teenage boys to get menstruation knowledge from discussions with mother, discussions with friends, discussions with other family members, discussions with a medical professional, and nonfiction books or medical literature. Teenage boys are significantly more likely than teenage girls to get menstruation knowledge from classes in school, fictional portrayals in television, movies, or online videos, and discussions with fathers.

## Parent and teen conversations about menstruation and their effects

Both parents and teens believe it is important to have conversations together about menstruation, though parents place greater importance on such conversations than teens do — 80% of parents and 59% of their teens agree it is “quite” or “very” important to discuss menstruation together. The importance placed on parent–teen conversations about menstruation does vary by gender — teenage girls are significantly more likely than teenage boys to rate these conversations as quite/very important (77% compared with 41%), and mothers are significantly more likely than fathers to rate these conversations as quite/very important (91% compared with 69%). (See Figures 3 and 4.)

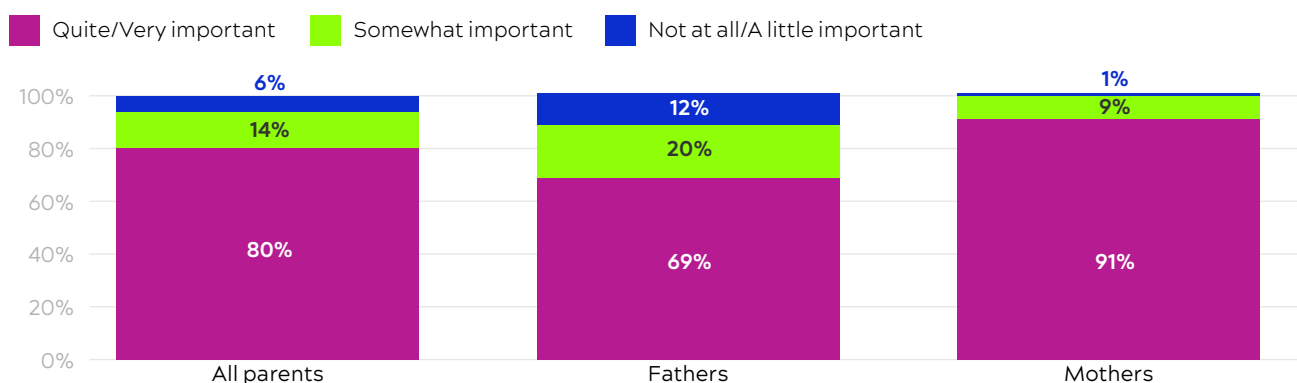
FIGURE 3

Teen responses for importance of discussing menstruation with a caregiver



Note. Teenage girls are significantly more likely than teenage boys to respond “Quite/Very important” but teenage boys are significantly more likely than teenage girls to respond “Not at all/A little important.” Columns may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

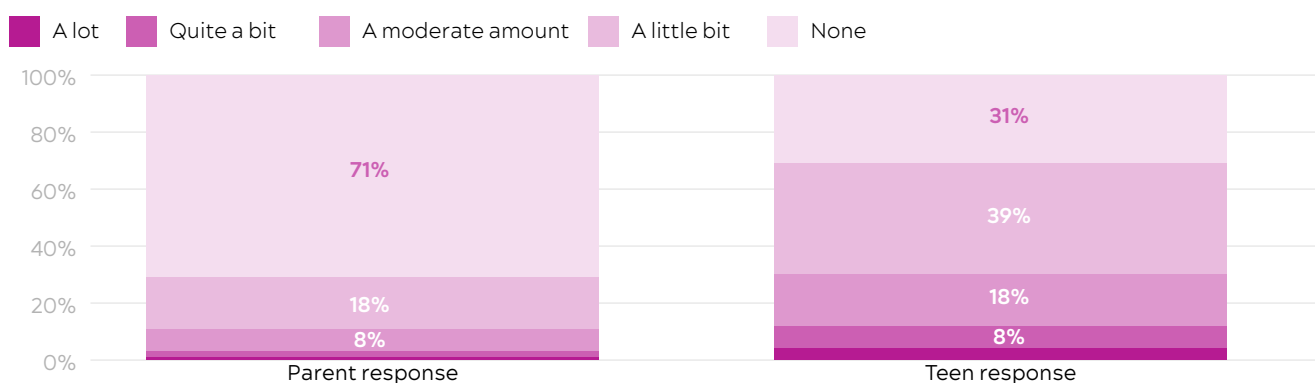
FIGURE 4

**Parent responses for importance of discussing menstruation with a caregiver**

Note. Mothers are significantly more likely than fathers to respond “Quite/Very important,” but fathers are significantly more likely than mothers to respond “Somewhat important” and “Not at all/A little important.” Columns may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Avoiding embarrassment may be a key reason menstruation goes undiscussed. Although 71% of parents say they feel no embarrassment when talking about this subject, teens are more shy — just 31% say they feel no embarrassment. (See Figure 6.) That said, only 12% of teens say they feel “a lot” or “quite a bit” of embarrassment discussing this topic. Most teens feel “a little bit” embarrassed (39%), while 18% feel “a moderate amount” of embarrassment. (See Figure 5.)

FIGURE 5

**Parents' and teens' embarrassment levels when discussing menstruation**

Note. Columns may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Parents and teens are watching TV together — 76% of parents and 69% of teens report watching television with each other at least once a week. Watching TV together proves to be an opportunity for discussion — 64% of parents say that watching television with their teen leads to conversations they may not have had otherwise regarding sensitive topics, if the show addresses those topics (e.g., mental health, bullying). Meanwhile, 52% of teens report the same.

When asked specifically about *menstruation*, 45% of parents say media portrayals of menstruation led to parent–teen conversations about the topic, while 40% of teens say the same. Moreover, a binary logistic regression indicates that both parents and teens who see portrayals of menstruation on screen are indeed significantly more likely to indicate they have discussed menstruation with each other.<sup>23</sup> These findings point to the potential for television to spark conversations about menstruation, a topic that families may struggle to raise on their own.

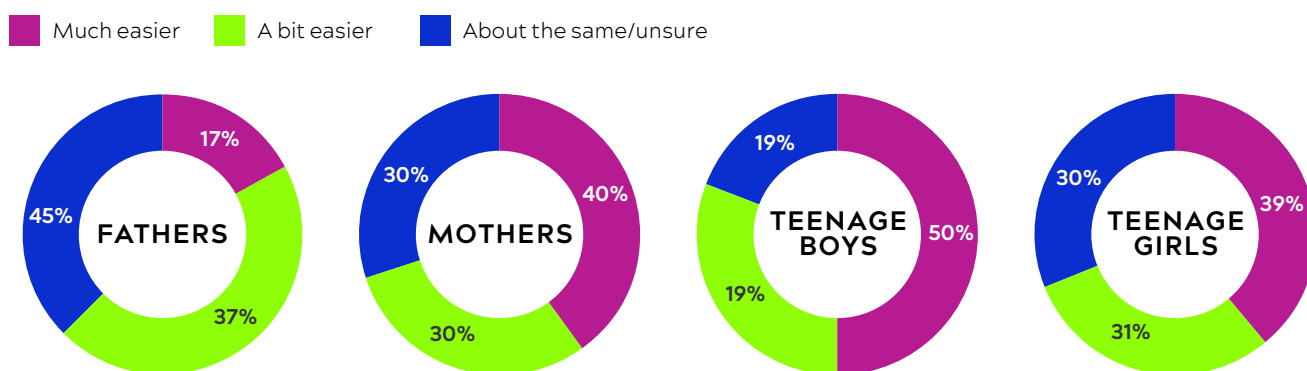
### 45% of parents say media portrayals of menstruation led to parent–teen conversations about the topic, while 40% of teens say the same.

Although seeing menstruation on screen is uncommon, respondents indicate these portrayals would make discussions about the topic easier. Three-fourths of teens (73%) say media portrayals of menstruation make discussing it with their parents “much easier” and “a bit easier,” while 66% of parents report the same.

Mothers are significantly more likely than fathers to say that media portrayals of menstruation (or period products) would help in making conversation about menstruation “much easier” (40% compared with 17%). While more teen boys than teen girls also report “much easier” for the same question (50% compared with 39%), the difference between the two is not statistically significant. (See Figure 6).

FIGURE 6

#### Do TV/movies about menstruation make conversations about this topic easier?



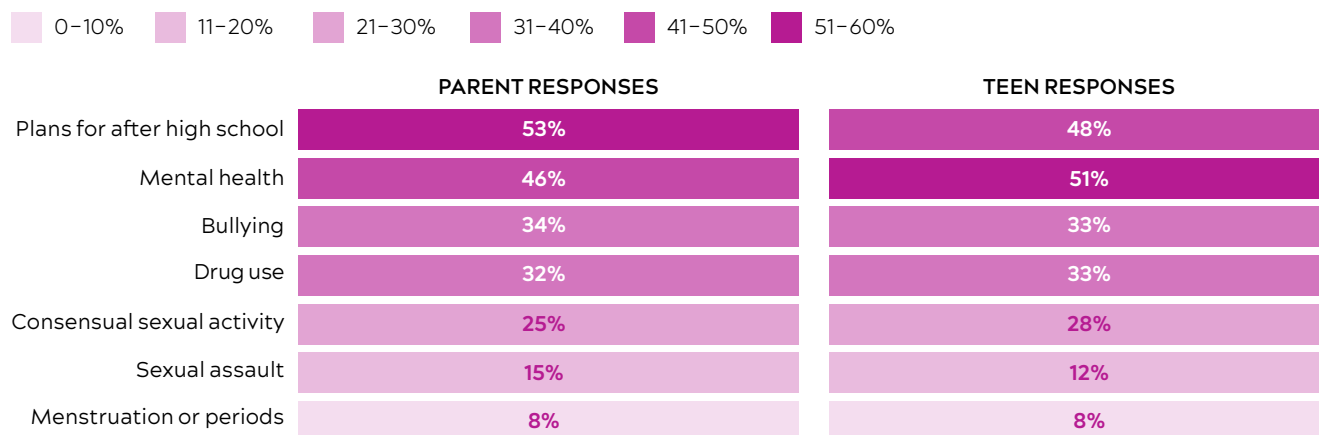
Note. Columns may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Although seeing these topics on screen can lead to discussions, parents and teens agree that menstruation portrayals on TV and in movies are rare, signaling a missed opportunity to catalyze conversation on this topic. When asked to think about the frequency of topics shown in television or films that parents and teens watch together (such as plans for high school, mental health, bullying, drug use, consensual sexual activity, and menstruation), both parents and teens say they saw menstruation

on screen the least. Just 8% of parents and teens say shows or movies they watched with one another were “very often” or “somewhat often” about menstruation, compared with 53% of parents and 48% of teens who say shows or films they watch together discuss character’s plans after high school “very often” and “somewhat often.” (See Figure 7.)

FIGURE 7

### Reported frequency of select topics in television and movies viewed together



Note. Cells indicate the proportion of respondents’ answering that they see the topic in TV/movies “very often” and “somewhat often.”

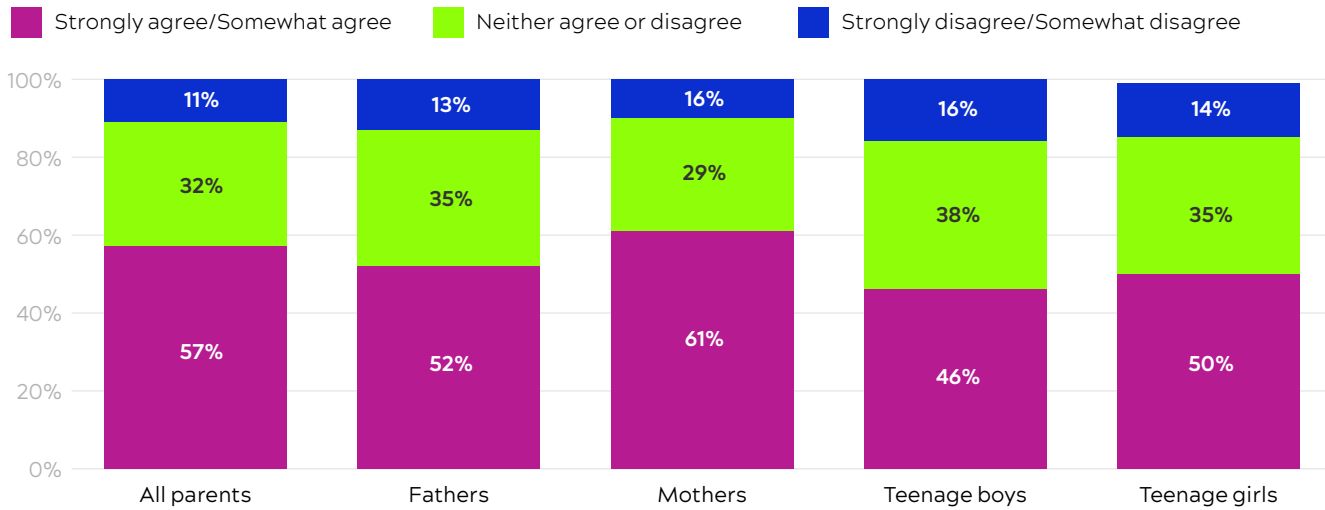
That said, teens do praise some of the portrayals they’ve seen on screen for normalizing menstruation and making them feel understood. For example, one teen respondent recalls the movie *Turning Red* (Pixar, 2022), saying, “It works as a praise to normalize menstruation.” Another teen says, “Characters show cramps, mood swings, asking for help, and learning confidence, which makes me feel normal and understood,” while another notes, “I’ve identified with characters who feel embarrassed or anxious about potential leaks, as this is a common and relatable experience.”

The survey also asked what viewers want from menstruation portrayals on screen. The takeaway is striking: Audiences are asking for less stigma and more respect.

Parents say they “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree” with the statement “I wish more TV shows and movies would portray menstruation in ways that are not traumatic or embarrassing.” Mothers are significantly more likely than fathers to agree — 61% “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree” with the statement, compared with 52% of fathers. (See Figure 8.)

FIGURE 8

**Are periods on screen too traumatic or embarrassing?**

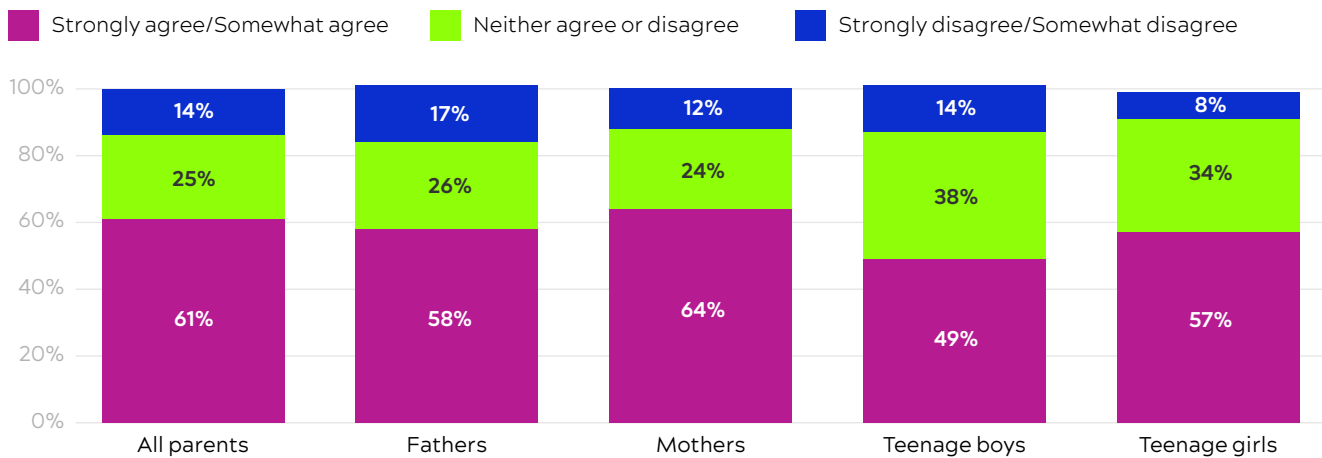


Note. Share who agree/disagree with the statement “I wish more TV shows and movies would portray menstruation in ways that are not traumatic or embarrassing.” Mothers are significantly more likely than fathers to respond “Agree/Somewhat agree.” Columns may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Even more parents (61%) “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree” that TV and movies often stereotype menstruating characters as emotional, angry, or out of control. (See Figure 9.)

FIGURE 9

**Are menstruating characters too often angry on screen?**

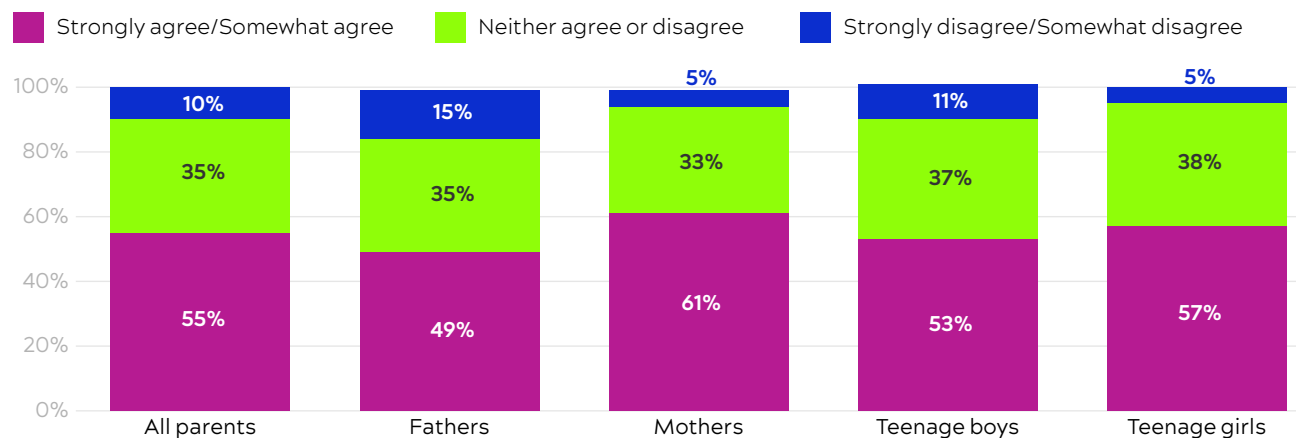


Note. Share who agree/disagree with the statement “TV and movie portrayals often stereotype menstruating characters as overly emotional, angry, or out of control.” Columns may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

A majority of parents (55%) want to see fewer jokes about periods being gross. Again, more mothers than fathers agree with this statement (61% compared with 49%). (See Figure 10.)

FIGURE 10

### Are there too many jokes on screen about periods being “gross”?



Note. Share who agree/disagree with the statement “I want to see fewer jokes about periods being gross in TV and movies.” Mothers are significantly more likely than fathers to respond “Agree/Somewhat agree,” and fathers are significantly more likely than mothers to respond “Disagree/Somewhat disagree.” Columns may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Overall, the survey points to a clear gap between how central menstruation is to teens' lives and how often it appears in the media they watch. Parents and teens value open conversation, but embarrassment and persistent myths still get in the way — especially for boys and fathers, who report lower understanding of and less comfort with the topic. When menstruation *is* shown on screen, it can prompt meaningful family conversations and help teens feel understood, yet such portrayals remain scarce.

The findings suggest a clear opportunity: Respectful, matter-of-fact depictions of menstruation could reduce stigma, support parent-teen communication, and meet audience demand for portrayals that feel normal rather than traumatic, embarrassing, or stereotyped.

**Overall, the survey points to a clear gap between how central menstruation is to teens' lives and how often it appears in the media they watch.**



Lucy Labriex / DigitalVision via Getty Images

## Transcript database findings

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To understand how depictions of menstruation on screen have evolved, we conducted a longitudinal analysis of menstruation phrases and words in U.S.-based transcripts of scripted TV from 1950–2018, from the TV Corpus database,<sup>24</sup> which is a dataset of 325 million words from over 75,000 TV shows. (See the methodology section for the keywords and phrases searched.) This analysis is limited to shows in English and in the U.S., which is 59,313 episodes. Unfortunately, the database has not been updated since 2018, but this time frame will still provide a useful set of benchmarks for understanding how scripted TV has evolved on this subject.

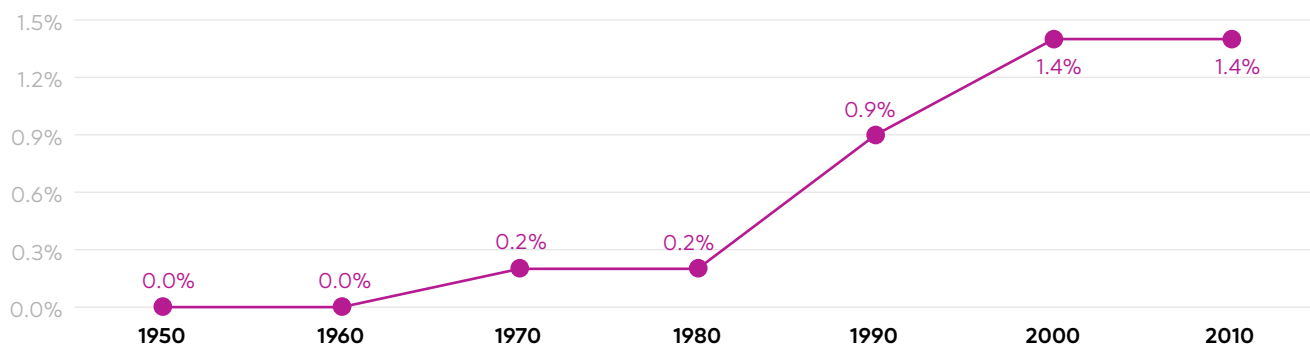
Using the key phrases and checking context, a total of 688 episodes mentioned menstruation, representing 1.2% of all episodes in the English-language subset of the dataset (59,313 episodes total).

When examining menstruation-related phrases and word frequency by decade, the highest share appears in the two most recent decades.<sup>25</sup> (See Figure 11.) This suggests menstruation is more commonly acknowledged in contemporary storytelling, indicating a gradual shift toward bringing menstruation into everyday dialogue on screen.

Shows that mention these phrases came from a variety of genres, with most in more recent decades, though there were some exceptions. For instance, traditional dramas like *Masters of Sex* (2013–2016) and *Thirtysomething* (1987–1991); coming-of-age dramas like *The Carrie Diaries* (2013–2014); dark comedies like *The Big C* (2010–2013), *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–2019), and *Shameless* (2011–2021); comedies starring women like *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015–2019), *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015–2019), *Broad City* (2014–2019), and *The Mindy Project* (2012–2017); and less often but also anti-rom-coms like *You're the Worst* (2014–2019) and horror shows like *Scream Queens* (2015–2016). Medical shows do not commonly mention these phrases and words, according to the analysis, but 6.1% of episodes of *ER* (1994–2009) included at least one key phrase or word about menstruation.

FIGURE 11

## Frequency of key phrases and words, by decade



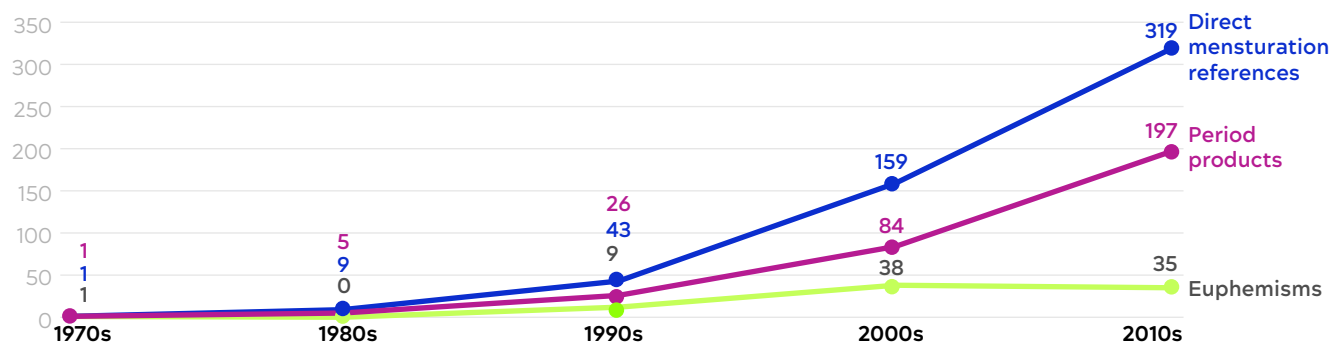
Across the 688 episodes from 1950 to 2018 containing references to menstruation, there were a total of 930 menstruation phrases and terms mentioned. The most frequently referenced were products, like *tampon(s)* (211), *pad(s)* (65), *Kotex* (8), *Tampax* (6), *liner(s)* (5), and *Diva cup* (1). More direct terminology was also common and included *my period(s)* (200), *your period(s)* (99), *menstrual* (90), *her period(s)* (79), *menstruation* (29), *menses* (21), and *feminine hygiene* (13). Overall, the searched innuendos and euphemisms were rare but included *time of the month* (64), *aunt(ie) flo(w)* (18), *shark week* (2), *code red* (1), and *lady business* (1). These findings show that media portrayals of menstruation blend direct language, product mentions, and playful euphemisms, though products and explicit period references appear most frequently.

In Figure 12, we present the frequency of these terms over the past five decades, grouped together as:

- ◆ Products.
- ◆ Euphemisms.
- ◆ Direct terminology.

FIGURE 12

## Frequency of menstruation language in TV scripts, by decade



Note. There was no mention of menstruation language in the transcripts from TV shows in the 1950s or 1960s.

Altogether, menstruation terms have broadly increased in their usage, with the exception of the euphemisms selected, which are being used less frequently relative to products and more frank terminology.



Jonath Kirn / The Image Bank via Getty Images

## Content analysis findings

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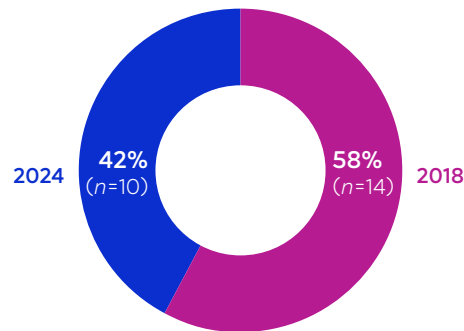
This section presents findings from an in-depth analysis of 313 episodes of TV for teens, which functions as a representative sample of teen series on air from 2018 and 2024, according to Luminate Film & TV, by Variety. These are shows with the tags “teen,” “coming-of-age,” “high school comedy,” and “high school drama” across broadcast, cable, and major streaming platforms.

Out of the 313 episodes under investigation from 2018 and 2024, only 6% ( $n = 18$ ) of episodes referenced menstruation. (If an episode talked about periods or displayed a menstrual product, we counted it as a menstruation reference.)

One episode contained three menstruation references, and another three episodes had two menstruation references each, which resulted in a total of 24 menstruation references across the entire sample of teen television programs. Most of the references we identified were quick one-liners or minor plots rather than integrated storylines. Additionally, 50% ( $n = 12$ ) of the scenes with menstruation references occurred in a bathroom or locker-room setting, while 50% did not take place in a bathroom or locker-room setting.

Of the 24 menstruation references, 58% occurred in the episodes from 2018, while 42% occurred in the episodes from 2024. This suggests that there hasn't been much of a shift in menstruation storylines on screen between these time frames.

FIGURE 13

**Menstruation references by year in teen television programs**

Despite menstruation being a very relevant topic to teens, menstruation is very rarely depicted on television programs intended for this audience, and there appears to be little change over the two time periods.

To explore how menstruation comes up (when it does), we conducted a qualitative analysis of how menstruation depictions in these teen-oriented television shows. This analysis focused not just on whether menstruation is mentioned but also on how it is communicated, visualized, and contextualized on screen. We examined the language characters used, the visibility of menstruation products, portrayals of coping behaviors, and the range of symptoms depicted. Together, these qualitative patterns illustrate whether contemporary teen shows normalize menstruation or continue to treat it as something to be ashamed of or to hide.

## The death of menstruation euphemisms?

Altogether, euphemisms were present in these references on screen but did not dominate period discussions. For example, one character used the term “shark week,” and another character used the term “monthly visitor.” In another episode, a character mentioned several times that they were “late.” An overreliance on euphemisms can reinforce the belief that menstruation is taboo.

However, a similar number of episodes used explicit terms and vocabulary to describe menstruation. These references ranged from characters using the word “period,” “period cramps,” “tampons,” “bleeding,” and “blood,” and another character said, “You can thank my uterus.” Altogether, menstruation is not communicated solely through euphemisms on screen.

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## Visibility of menstruation products

Menstruation products were both discussed and shown in these episodes, though it was uncommon. In one episode, a character asked her mother for a tampon, and in another episode, a tampon was produced to help a male character with a nosebleed. In another, the string of a used tampon was shown as a bookmark in a book of spells that required blood for it to be read. In several episodes with bathroom scenes, tampon and pad dispensers were visible but went unremarked upon. In total, we identified 26% ( $n = 82$ ) of all 313 episodes that contained bathroom scenes; when we looked closely at each bathroom scene, 13% of these ( $n = 11$ ) showed menstruation products.

## Period coping on screen is rare

In these episodes, only a few narratives dealt with period coping, which refers to the strategies, behaviors, or adjustments people use to manage all aspects of menstruation. This can include addressing pain or discomfort, or making adjustments to manage mood or energy changes. In one episode, we saw a teenage girl go to the nurse's office for medication for her cramps. After handing her the appropriate medication, the nurse then handed her a pamphlet on birth control pills as an option to alleviate her frequent period cramps. In another episode, a character demanded water, implying she was thirsty because she was on her period. Eating to satisfy food cravings was not identified in any episodes.

## Period symptoms are narrowly discussed

Period symptoms were noted in several episodes. Symptoms shown or mentioned included cramps, emotional irregularities, mood swings, and breast enlargement. These depictions highlighted only a limited set of symptoms, leaving out many common experiences — such as fatigue, headaches, or gastrointestinal issues — that could provide a fuller picture of menstruation.

## Hysteria is out, empowered is in?

Just two characters who were experiencing menstruation were framed as hysterical or overly emotional. One female character was shown demanding water, using an angry tone of voice, and stated that she was entitled to it because she was on her period. Another character was shown as overly sensitive and credited her period for those feelings. One narrative abandoned the trope that periods are disempowering, instead featuring a character in pursuit of ingredients for a magical spell. The spell required blood, and her period came to the rescue. In another episode, a tampon was used to stop a nosebleed. The characters laughed about how the male character looked with the tampon in his nose, but the joke was not rooted in mocking periods or femininity.

## Missed periods and pregnancy is a common storyline

Missed periods were common among these references. Although a missed period can be due to many different circumstances, such as underlying illnesses, hormone irregularities, or stress, all of

the menstruation references mentioning a missed or late period were in regard to pregnancy scares. By reducing a late period to a shorthand for pregnancy — despite its many other causes — television continues to limit the narrative space for more expansive depictions of menstrual health.

## Periods are rarely punchlines or a source of disgust

In these episodes, menstruation and periods were rarely the source of a punchline. However, in one episode, characters described a man who is behaving poorly as on his “man period.” This joke unfairly uses menstruation as a metaphor for bad behavior and reinforces the belief that women on their period are unruly or irrational. In these episodes, periods were largely not characterized as gross or disgusting. In one episode, a male character made a gesture of disgust when asked to read a book of spells with a used tampon as a bookmark; the two female characters he was with rolled their eyes, and he ended up reading the book despite his initial recoiling. Other than this instance, there were no other storylines where periods were described or suggested to be disgusting.

Beyond explicit mentions of menstruation, we also flagged scenes in all 313 episodes analyzed where a menstruation reference would have been either seamless or relevant. These topics or scenes included puberty references, sex references, pregnancy portrayals or references, contraception references, and sports or athletic scenes.

About half of the 313 episodes had a narrative about sex (47%). Another common topic was sports — 44% of all episodes. However, in the context of narratives of sex and sports, menstruation never came up.

Menstruation was referenced only within the topics of pregnancy, which was featured in 18% of the 313 episodes analyzed, and contraception, which was featured in 1% of the 313 episodes analyzed. Puberty was discussed in 4% of 313 episodes, but periods were not discussed alongside that topic.

Taken together, these findings indicate that menstruation is largely absent from broader narratives where it would be contextually appropriate. This absence underscores a persistent reluctance to integrate menstruation into routine storylines, even as other aspects of adolescent health and development receive attention.

TABLE 3

### Frequency of relevant references in teen television programs

Topic	Percent of all episodes that mention topic
Sex	47% ( <i>n</i> = 146)
Sports	44% ( <i>n</i> = 136)
Pregnancy	18% ( <i>n</i> = 57)
Puberty	4% ( <i>n</i> = 11)
Contraception	1% ( <i>n</i> = 4)

Note. Frequencies are reported at the asset level. For instance, 18% of all 313 episodes analyzed contained at least one pregnancy plot or subplot.



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## Recommendations

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The survey findings illustrate the power of menstruation stories on screen to aid parent-teen conversations. Despite this potential, menstruation portrayals in teen TV shows are uncommon, which can contribute to stigma and the mystification about menstruation in the real world.

These findings lead us to the following recommendations to increase and improve the representation of menstruation on TV for teens.

**Period products can be authentic props.** Consider bathrooms at home or in public spaces, locker rooms, or bedrooms as key settings where period products can be seamlessly integrated. Similarly, consider the placement of period products in backpacks, handbags, purses, lockers, drawers, or a suitcase for travel. This adds a subtle layer of relatability and can make characters feel more authentic.

**Ensure menstruation feels like a natural part of the storyline.** When menstruation appears on screen, it should feel natural rather than forced or performative. Audiences engage most with a topic when it is woven into the storytelling, not presented as a public service announcement. Identify moments in your scripts where menstruation could enrich the story; key opportunities include plots involving sports, sex, or puberty. By adding menstruation subplots to these existing storylines, creators can normalize menstrual experiences while enhancing character depth and narrative authenticity.

**Understand menstrual tropes so stories reflect real experiences, not myths.** Writers should be mindful of the period tropes outlined in this report. These long-standing clichés have often framed menstruation as dirty, embarrassing, or a joke, and have used it as an easy explanation for a character's emotions or mood. Such portrayals flatten characters and reinforce outdated assumptions about women and girls. Humor can have a place in menstruation stories, but it should avoid positioning women as the punchline.

**Diversify menstruation storylines.** Menstruation is a long-term part of many women's lives, and its relevance extends far beyond pregnancy. Portray it as a broader health and life experience by exploring its role in relationships, stress, health concerns, and everyday responsibilities in school, work, and social settings. Broadening these contexts leads to more accurate and authentic on-screen stories. And as our survey data shows, these storylines can lead to more direct conversations about this topic between teens and their parents.

**Go beyond one-liners when portraying menstruation.** Many of the menstruation references we identified were brief, with almost no integration into subplots or main storylines. Treat menstruation as a nuanced experience that can deepen character development. Rather than relying on quick mentions, expand these moments into scenes or exchanges that allow characters to respond with resonance, empathy, or meaningful acknowledgment.

# Appendix A

TABLE 1A. DEMOGRAPHICS OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

	Parents	Teens
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	53%	47%
Male	46%	50%
Nonbinary	1%	3%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
White	60%	60%
Hispanic	14%	14%
Black	11%	12%
Other	15%	14%
<b>Age</b>		
13	–	16%
14	–	15%
15	–	24%
16	–	24%
17	–	19%
18	–	2%
<b>Educational attainment</b>		
No high school/High school graduate	32%	–
Some college/2-year college	29%	–
4-year college	23%	–
Postgraduate degree	16%	–

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16. Source: English-Corpora: TV
17. Major streaming services included Amazon Prime Video, Apple TV+, Disney+, Max, Hulu, Netflix, Paramount+, and Peacock.
18. The final sample was determined with 95% confidence interval and 5% margin of error.
19. Eight episodes randomly sampled for the 2024 series had not yet aired and were therefore excluded from the 313 episodes.
20. Before analysis, training and acceptable levels of interrater reliability were reached among three analysts.
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23. A binary logistic regression was conducted with gender and age as control variables.
24. <https://www.english-corpora.org/tv/>
25. To double-check that a lack of examples in the 1950s and 1960s were not due to what euphemisms we chose, we re-ran the keyword search and context, checking again with an additional four phrases: "the curse," "the visitor," "monthly sickness," and "on the rag." This yielded no mentions from the 1950s or 1960s, and all analyses were virtually the same with them included or excluded. We report on the analyses we ran before adding these additional euphemisms.

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# About the Geena Davis Institute

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