

# EXPERIENCES OF MENSTRUATION IN YOUNG PEOPLE WITH AUTISM: A SCOPING REVIEW

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## BACKGROUND

Understanding the phenotypical differences and unique challenges for women with autism has garnered increasing attention in recent years. However, autism-specific reproductive and women's health continues to be a poorly understood area.

Sensory processing differences are an established feature of autism; therefore, the cyclical nature of menstrual symptoms may present significant and unique sensory challenges. The interoceptive differences in autism, and challenges with habituation of these signals, may impact on the experience of menstruation.

It remains unclear how those with autism experience menstruation compared to the neurotypical population.

## AIMS AND HYPOTHESIS

To identify existing literature which explores the experiences of menstruation in young people (YP) with autism. We hypothesise that YP with autism are likely to experience different difficulties in relation to menstruation, when compared to their neurotypical peers.

## METHODS

A systematic search was undertaken. Search terms: Autism Or Autis\* OR Asperg\* AND menarche OR menstr\*. Inclusion criteria: autism spectrum condition, <25yo, menstruation as exposure/experience. Two researchers independently screened titles to identify/appraise papers. Data were collated using a narrative approach.



## RESULTS

9 studies met inclusion criteria: 2 case reports/series, 4 cross sectional, 1 retrospective cohort and 2 qualitative.<sup>1-9</sup> Studies included information from teachers, parents and health professionals as well as YP with autism.

Several studies identified complications including premenstrual syndrome (PMS), dysmenorrhoea and menorrhagia. One group reported high levels of dysmenorrhoea (67%) and PMS (86%) from 124 parents and similar levels (76% and 71% respectively) in a further sample of 21 parents.<sup>2,3</sup> A sample of 14 autistic YP found mood/behaviour changes in 35.7% and menorrhagia in 28.6%, whilst a self-report study of 172 identified equivalent levels of dysmenorrhoea, physical/emotional symptoms in YP with autism and neurotypical peers.<sup>5,6</sup>

Several case reports identified significant menstrual complications and cyclical exacerbation of autistic-behaviours. One case led to the request for a hysterectomy.<sup>7-9</sup>

## DISCUSSION

This subject is under-researched with small heterogenous studies, often focusing on YP with intellectual disability or comorbid genetic disorders, such as Rett's or Angelman's Syndrome.

To our knowledge, there are no direct studies focussing on the sensory experiences of menstruation for YP with autism. However this is hypothetically plausible given results from adult studies.<sup>10</sup>

Data on the prevalence of menstrual disorders in this population is sparse and conflicting.

Limitations include: autistic YP discerning symptoms, cognitive/language delays, lack of diagnostic tools, poor awareness, small sample sizes, heterogenous methodologies and predominantly parent-reported data.

## CONCLUSIONS

Further research is warranted in this area, with recognition of the importance of understanding autistic YP's needs in reproductive health, to subsequently inform interventions.

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