

Ginger Tea & Yoga

By Matilda Hockey

I remember watching an episode of *Operation Ouch!*, around ten years old at the time. There was a segment on periods and, having already experienced some light, irregular spotting, I considered myself an expert on the subject. “There’ll be a bit of blood each month which you can catch on a pad,” Dr. Chris had informed me. “Nothing to worry about.” I was relieved to hear from this medical professional that the bleeding I was having wasn’t a big deal. It wasn’t even painful! I didn’t know what everyone was so worried about.

After a year or two of irregular spotting, my periods became monthly and heavier than before. I now got cramps with my bleeding and found that a pad was no longer enough to catch all the blood. As an avid swimmer, I was terrified that my bleeding would interfere with my training. Would I ever go in the pool again? What about sleepovers? It was frightening to think I might start bleeding at any moment. That’s when I was introduced to the tampon — a whole new world of possibility.

But things got worse in grade 8. Much worse. I was missing days off school every month due to the severity of my cramps. I couldn’t take down any food or water without vomiting it back up, confined to my bed for the first day or two of each period. It felt like my uterus was on fire. Every minute was excruciating.

It continued like this, each year a bit worse than the last. I had to sit my exams late. Had to catch up on days’ worth of classwork. Had to stop going out with my friends. On countless occasions I’d been so close to my running goal, watched my fitness slip away after a week-long, painful period, then had to start again from square one. These periods weren’t the simple, trouble-free experiences Dr. Chris had promised me they were. They were interfering with my life.

I was diagnosed early last year with a condition called endometriosis. There is no cure.

This is my story, but there are millions of girls out there who share these experiences. One in ten women is affected by endometriosis, but if you’re anything like I was, you’re probably wondering what that means. Endometriosis, or “endo”, is a disorder where the endometrial tissue that lines the uterus grows outside the uterus. The monthly hormonal cycle causes these endometriotic implants to swell. Under the influence of oestrogen, the cells thicken and bleed when the hormone levels drop during menstruation. This releases prostaglandin, an inflammatory compound which irritates pain fibers in the area, increasing pain. And I mean pain with a capital P.

It’s hard to describe how it feels. For me, I guess it’s like my uterus has been lit on fire and stabbed with knives. I’m doubled over in pain, unable to move. The cramps shoot through me like a sharp, burning electrical shock, arriving in waves that can last for hours. Sometimes it feels like I’m being torn in half. You just have to squeeze your eyes shut, bite your lip, clutch that heat pack close, and scream internally. The body responds to this pain by surrounding the affected area with scar tissue and inflammation, sometimes resulting in damage to other pelvic structures.

There is more to this condition than cramps, however. My bleeding has been so heavy that it once soaked right through my super tampon and super pad within the hour. My iron levels have been dangerously low due to such extreme blood loss, resulting in nausea, headaches, fatigue, and poor concentration on a daily basis.

Mental health is another major factor in endometriosis. Researchers have found that people with endo are twice as likely to experience depression. Endo symptoms can critically decrease quality of life, thereby causing patients to feel anxious and depressed. “When you live with chronic pain, you can’t predict how life will be, day-to-day,” researcher, Peter Saddington says. “Ordinary things can be difficult. This can lead you to feel angry and depressed that life has affected you in this way.” Researchers have also discovered that high levels of depression and anxiety will amplify the severity of cramps, and thus the vicious cycle goes on.

Endometriosis has such a significant and damaging impact on so many women's lives, yet not many people know or consider it. The amount of times I've had people tell me, *Just use a heat pack, Just do some yoga, Just drink some ginger tea*. Believe me, I've tried it all; dieting, a heat pack, a TENS machine, Ponstan, and yes, ginger tea. Sure, these treatments can offer me temporary pain relief, but not until after I've sat through hours of cramps and vomiting beforehand.

It important to inform people about this condition so that girls like myself don't have to feel bad for not being able to handle the pain. You're not weak because that ginger tea didn't work. You're not overreacting because you had to stay home from school. You're not unprofessional because you had to cancel your shift at work. If more people recognised this, than perhaps there could be less pressure to soldier on. Please understand when I need an assignment extension, when I have to reschedule that exam, when I have to cancel that shift at the last minute, or when I can't come to that sleepover.

If you have endo, please speak up and advocate for yourself. Sit down with your teacher and make a plan to manage this with assessment. Let your boss know so they can work your shifts around your period. It's a simple step to take to bring to light a hidden condition that is so much more than just a bad period. A cup of ginger tea and a yoga session just aren't gonna cut it. This is something a little more extreme that needs to be talked about, so let's raise awareness!