



# SUPPORTING FEMALE ATHLETES IN TAEKWON-DO: Breaking Barriers and Embracing Period Positivity

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## INTRODUCTION

Taekwon-Do is not just about physical prowess; it's about mental resilience, discipline, and pushing boundaries. As coaches, it's our responsibility to ensure all athletes, regardless of gender, feel supported and empowered to excel in their training. Today, we're delving into a topic that's often overlooked in sports – menstruation. Let's discuss what periods are, how to support female athletes during this time, the issue of period poverty, and why embracing period positivity is essential for creating an inclusive and empowering training environment.

In a survey conducted by the AETF Women's Committee in 2024 (3rd AETF Women Committee Survey), athletes highlighted concerns around attitudes towards menstruation,

**“EMPOWERING FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN TAEKWON-DO MEANS NORMALISING DISCUSSIONS ABOUT THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE. IT'S A NATURAL ASPECT OF OUR PHYSIOLOGY, NOT A TABOO.”**

the reluctance to discuss their menstrual cycles and associated symptoms. A survey participant commented that during a sparring match, her period started unexpectedly and she was made to feel ashamed by the all-male umpires who were leading the ring. Survey participants noted that the frequency and ease of conversations with their coach regarding this topic were crucial. Importantly, they expressed greater comfort confiding in fellow female coaches.





**“I find I am more likely to skip classes, which is genuinely something I very rarely do, if I am on my period. I also have much less energy while on my period and the men I train with don't comprehend that, and having to explain it to them doesn't bother me, but I feel it should be normalised to take a step back from pushing yourself too hard while on your period due to lack of energy”**

Survey Participant, 2024

## Understanding Menstruation

The menstrual cycle is a biological process for reproduction in females. It's not just a period – the cycle is a repeating pattern of fluctuating hormones which are very individual. A female's experience of their cycle will be unique, influenced by factors such as genetics, lifestyle, and overall health. A typical cycle ranges from 21-35 days, up to 40 days in adolescents, though variations are common. It's important to note that a regular cycle may vary in length and consistency. Day one of the cycle is characterised by the bleed, known as menses, menstruation, or a period, which marks the beginning of a new

cycle. On average, females start their period around 12 years, with ranges from 8 to 15 years. Understanding and respecting the intricacies of the menstrual cycle is essential for creating a supportive and inclusive environment for female athletes.

**More than four in five (84%) teenage girls say their interest in sport and fitness diminished after starting their period and almost one in four (23%) say they feel embarrassed to take part in physical activity during their menstrual cycle.**

Nuffield Health, UK, July 2023



The symptoms accompanying the menstrual cycle encompass a broad spectrum of experiences, ranging from physical discomfort to emotional changes. Despite the diversity of symptoms, many individuals find relief through simple interventions such as dietary adjustments and lifestyle modifications. It's important to recognise that experiencing these symptoms should not hinder individuals from engaging in their daily activities, training routines, or competitive pursuits. With proper management strategies in place, individuals can navigate their menstrual cycles with resilience and minimal disruption to their lives.

Symptom	Description
Abdominal pain/cramping	Pain or discomfort in the abdominal area
Bloating	Feeling of fullness or swelling in the abdomen
Fatigue	Extreme tiredness or exhaustion
Backache	Ache or discomfort in the lower back
Leg pain	Pain or discomfort in the legs
Pelvic pain	Pain or discomfort in the pelvic region
Diarrhea	Frequent bowel movements with loose or watery stools
Constipation	Difficulty passing stools or infrequent bowel movements
Nausea	Feeling of queasiness or the urge to vomit
Weight changes	Fluctuations in body weight
Irritability	Easily annoyed or provoked behaviour
Breast pain	Pain or tenderness in the breasts
Emotional sensitivity	Heightened sensitivity to emotions
Food cravings	Intense desire for specific foods
Lethargy	Lack of energy or enthusiasm
Decreased energy levels	Reduced physical or mental energy levels
Reduced motivation	Decreased drive or enthusiasm for activities
Headaches	Aches or pains in the head
Acne	Skin condition characterised by pimples or blemishes
Clumsiness	Lack of coordination or clumsiness

### Good Signs of Health

The menstrual cycle as a sign of good health: A regular period with only mild symptoms is an important marker of good underlying health. Having a menstrual cycle is like having an extra vital sign - like heart rate or body temperature. Unusual menstrual cycle variations can tell someone when their overall well-being is disturbed, when something is a bit off, or when they may have a medical condition that could need treatment.

### What sets adolescents' menstrual cycles apart?

Adolescent girls may require guidance in balancing athletics with menstruation management. Typically, girls commence menstruation at approximately 12 years old, although onset can occur as early as 8 years. If a girl reaches 15 years without experiencing menstruation or encounters

unmanageable symptoms disrupting daily life or athletic training, seeking medical advice is advisable.

It's common for teenagers to report heightened menstrual cycle symptoms such as premenstrual syndrome, bloating, breast tenderness, and mood swings. The abrupt hormonal fluctuations characteristic of early menstruation can amplify these effects, as the body adjusts to the cyclical changes.

### **Increased injury risk**

Increased injury risk in female athletes can be attributed to various factors influenced by hormonal fluctuations throughout the menstrual cycle. While estrogen improves muscle protein regulation, reducing the likelihood of muscle injuries compared to males,

it also leads to decreased connective tissue stiffness, increasing the risk of ligament injuries such as anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) tears in the knee. Additionally, differences in strength and movement mechanics during landing and change of direction movements contribute to this heightened risk.

However, there's encouraging evidence suggesting that strength and movement skill/control can be trained effectively through exercises like landing and plyometric jumping drills, which can progressively enhance an athlete's control and reduce injury risk. Implementing such training as part of a warm-up routine, for just 10-15 minutes, 2-3 times per week, has shown significant benefits. Furthermore, considering the influence of hormonal changes on balance throughout the menstrual cycle, female athletes are advised to monitor their cycles in relation to balance and injury prevalence, especially in sports with increased risks of concussion or serious injuries. Adjusting training and competition regimes accordingly based on any observed patterns can help mitigate injury risks effectively.



**78% of girls say they avoid sport when they have their period**

Women In Sport, 2022



## Supporting Female Athletes

Coaches could be dismissive as they may feel women should be prepared for their periods, but it's essential to acknowledge that planning for the period can sometimes catch athletes off guard. Menstrual cycles can be irregular, and unexpected changes or discomfort can arise, even with meticulous planning. This is where the support that coaches offer becomes crucial. By understanding and empathising with the unique challenges female athletes face during their periods, coaches can provide invaluable support and assistance. Here are some ways coaches can support their female athletes:

### 1 Open Communication

Creating a psychologically safe environment is crucial in addressing the silence, secrecy, and judgment surrounding female-specific factors in sports.

### 2 Flexible Training Schedules

Are essential for accommodating the unique needs of female athletes, particularly during their menstrual cycles.

### 3 Provide Access to Amenities

Ensuring access to amenities is vital for supporting female athletes.

### 4 Educate Athletes Educating

Athletes, both male and female, about menstruation is essential for promoting understanding and inclusivity within the training environment.

### 5 Empowerment and Support

Are crucial components of fostering a positive and inclusive training environment for female athletes, particularly during their menstrual cycles.

## Open Communication

Many female athletes feel uncomfortable discussing these topics openly, leading to unnecessary suffering from manageable or treatable conditions. The stigma associated with menstruation often exacerbates this discomfort, with girls feeling embarrassed by their periods. Coaches and other support staff can play a vital role in fostering an environment where female athletes feel empowered to have open conversations about their health without fear of judgment. By normalising discussions about female-specific factors and ensuring confidentiality and respect, coaches can help break down barriers and encourage female athletes to seek the support they need. Factors influencing openness and comfort in discussing these topics include the perceived awkwardness of the other person, past experiences, perceptions of knowledge levels, and the availability of opportunities for conversations. It's essential for coaches and athletes alike to work together in creating an environment where these discussions are welcomed and supported.

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## Flexible Training Schedules

It's crucial to recognise that menstruation can bring about varying levels of fatigue, discomfort, and even pain for some athletes. By being attuned to these fluctuations, coaches can implement flexibility into training schedules, thereby supporting the overall well-being and performance of their athletes. This flexibility might involve allowing for adjustments in training intensity, duration, or type of exercise to align with the athlete's energy levels and comfort during different phases of their cycle. Additionally, providing options for rest days or lighter training sessions when needed can help mitigate the impact of menstrual symptoms on training quality and performance. By embracing flexibility and responsiveness to individual needs, coaches can empower female athletes to maintain their training consistency and optimise their performance throughout their menstrual cycles.







**"In Taekwon-Do, women possess the strength and grace to excel, defying stereotypes and embracing their full potential. With the unwavering support of the AETF Women's Committee, we strive to create an inclusive environment where every woman can thrive and contribute her unique skills, fostering empowerment, and building self-esteem through participation."**

### **Provide Access to Amenities**

Training facilities should provide restrooms stocked with menstrual products, a spare pair of Dobook bottoms and clean water. Additionally, private areas for changing or attending to personal needs should be available. Sanitary products should also be accessible from a first aid kit, ensuring convenience and comfort for female athletes during training sessions away from regular training facilities.

### **Educate Athletes**

Coaches should take the time to teach athletes about the biological processes involved, debunking myths and misconceptions surrounding menstruation. Open and informed discussions, coaches can help create a culture of period positivity, where menstruation is viewed as a normal and natural part of life.

### **Empowerment and Support**

Coaches should empower female athletes to listen to their bodies and prioritise self-care during their periods. Encouraging them to recognise and honour their physical and emotional needs can help them navigate their menstrual cycles with confidence and resilience. Additionally, coaches should foster a culture where female athletes feel comfortable communicating their needs and advocating for themselves when necessary. By providing a platform for open dialogue and support, coaches can help female athletes feel empowered to assert their needs and preferences, ensuring that they receive the care and accommodations they require to perform at their best.





Period poverty refers to the lack of access to menstrual hygiene products, adequate sanitation facilities, and menstrual health education, primarily due to economic constraints. It encompasses the inability of individuals, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, to afford or access essential menstrual supplies such as sanitary pads, tampons, or menstrual cups.

## Addressing Period Poverty

Period poverty in sports is a pressing issue, particularly for adolescents and teenagers who may face challenges in accessing affordable sanitary items. The financial burden of purchasing menstrual products can create barriers to participation in sports for young athletes from low-income backgrounds. This disparity not only affects their physical comfort and confidence but also exacerbates feelings of exclusion and stigma surrounding menstruation. To address period poverty in grassroots sport clubs, proactive measures must be taken.

Clubs can establish initiatives to provide free or subsidised menstrual products in restroom facilities, ensuring that young athletes have access to essential hygiene products during training sessions and competitions. Additionally, raising awareness and destigmatising discussions about menstruation within the club environment can foster a supportive atmosphere where athletes feel comfortable addressing their menstrual health needs openly.



Action Aid, 2022



## Conclusion

In conclusion, as Taekwon-Do coaches, we recognise that supporting female athletes goes beyond physical training—it involves creating an inclusive and empowering environment that acknowledges and respects their unique needs, including those related to menstruation. By fostering open communication, providing flexible training schedules, ensuring access to amenities, educating athletes, and offering empowerment and support, we can help female athletes navigate their menstrual cycles with confidence and resilience. Additionally, addressing period poverty in sports, particularly among adolescents and teenagers, is crucial for promoting equal opportunities for participation. By implementing proactive measures within grassroots sports clubs, such as providing free or subsidised menstrual products and destigmatising discussions about menstruation, we can work towards creating a more equitable and supportive sporting community. With our pivotal role, let's break barriers, embrace period positivity, and empower female athletes to excel in Taekwon-Do and beyond. Together, let's continue to lead by example and create a more equitable and supportive environment for all athletes.



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## **Resources & Signposting**

### **Supporting the Developing Female Athlete**

<https://uksportsinstitute.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Supporting-the-developing-female-athlete-full-resource.pdf>

### **The Menstrual Cycle: Female Athletes' Experiences and Perceptions**

<https://www.ukcoaching.org/resources/topics/diagram-infographic/the-menstrual-cycle-female-athletes-experiences-an>

### **Menstrual Cycles and Participation**

<https://www.ukcoaching.org/resources/topics/webinars/subscription/menstrual-cycles-and-participation>

### **Sport, Physical Activity and the Menstrual Cycle**

<https://www.ukcoaching.org/resources/topics/guides/sport,-physical-activity-and-the-menstrual-cycle>

### **Action Aid**

<https://www.actionaid.org.uk/our-work/womens-rights/period-poverty>

### **Freedom4Girls**

<https://www.freedom4girls.co.uk>

### **Red Cross**

<https://redcross.eu/projects/girl-to-woman>