

HEALTH AND HYGIENE GUIDELINES FOR ACCESSIBLE FIELDWORK

Best practice for personal hygiene, toilet facilities and menstruation management for fieldwork.

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Aims and Purpose

This document provides generalised guidelines for managing toileting facilities and menstruation on fieldwork. This document can be used as a talking point by a fieldwork lead in the pre-deployment briefing and shared among the field team to address taboo topics and potential concerns. This document does not replace a thorough risk assessment, and a bespoke standard operating procedure (SOP) should be constructed for site specific work. All information here should be used in conjunction with a relevant site-specific risk assessment.

Context

For many field scientists their first experience of working in remote environments, away from running water, showers or flushing toilets comes during their studies or at some point quite early on in their career. Unfortunately, how likely you are to have had prior exposure to these conditions can vary based on your location, cultural or socio-economic background and this bias continues to fuel inequalities and retention in field-based science.

The safety and norms afforded to office-based environments are often lost on fieldwork and this presents unique challenges and difficulties for individuals to navigate. When we combine this with the taboo attitude around talking about toileting and menstruation, we can see how stressful fieldwork can be for some individuals.

It is difficult if not impossible to adhere to traditional social etiquette where there is limited access to safe, clean and private sanitation facilities and often “unknown” disposal facilities (Nash 2019; 2022). Limited or poorly communicated facilities exacerbate stress, particularly for individuals with medical conditions affecting urinary or bowel function that affects frequency and urgency when needing to toilet. It's therefore important that we foster open communication and trust amongst fieldworkers to ensure everyone feels safe and supported on fieldwork.



Safe and Inclusive Fieldwork

Providing a safe environment of equal opportunities and dignity on fieldwork means considering a number of potential barriers people from a range of backgrounds might experience. All fieldwork should consider staff and student mental and physical health as well as all protected characteristics. This document focuses on toilet etiquette and menstruation on fieldwork, but this is just one part of the equation in creating safe and inclusive fieldwork. We encourage all users to consider other ways they might enhance their inclusivity practice from considering neurodivergence to ensuring safe field locations for LGBTQ+ participants.



Field Kits

Before considering some of the intricacies and taboo topics around toileting and menstruation – it is first important to properly communicate the expectations for personal field kits. This is especially necessary for fieldworkers who may have limited experience of both fieldwork and of navigating outdoor spaces in their personal time. It's important not to single out individuals here, or assume a certain level of knowledge – assuming less knowledge and treating everyone equally creates an equitable environment with more opportunity for all field members to learn and thrive.

The availability of drinkable water and the need to bring a reusable/refillable drinking container/bottle should be communicated prior to fieldwork. Also, be clear how much water each individual should bring with them daily to stay hydrated. Stress that dehydration can occur even during a cool day, especially if it is windy. Make toileting situations clear so fieldworkers do not restrict their fluid intake to avoid needing the toilet (see below).

The dangers of sun and/or wind burn, and the need for sunscreen, even on cloudy days also needs to be stressed. It should not be assumed that fieldworkers are aware of all the potential weather outcomes, and the importance of wearing layers. For example, the personal field gear needed for prolonged outdoor work in which you are standing still for long periods of time taking measurements or making notes is different to what is needed for leisurely walking. **It is better to have too many layers than not enough!** Dependent on weather conditions, field leaders should be alert to signs of heat exhaustion, heat stroke or hyperthermia in their group, and act accordingly to administer first aid.

Whilst on remote or protracted fieldwork, personal cleanliness should also be addressed and personal hygiene encouraged. Personal preference and field location will inform the best practice for this scenario but it is important to be clear and descriptive – for example is it appropriate to use wet wipes in the tent or are there open water bodies that can be used? Will you be working in a sensitive environment and are there procedures for proper disposal of cleaning products like wet wipes? What washing products and drying items will be needed.

Providing a checklist well in advance of fieldwork as part of any pre-deployment paperwork (see example below and cater to the environment i.e., polar, tropical, hiking, river work):

Personal Field Kit Checklist

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| ☐ Water bottle (1-2L) | ☐ Toilet paper and/or pee-rags |
| ☐ Sunscreen | ☐ Personal snacks |
| ☐ Sun hat | ☐ Menstrual products (if applicable) |
| ☐ Sunglasses | ☐ Nappy bags or Ziploc bags for toilet paper, wet wipes and disposable menstrual products |
| ☐ Lip balm with sun protection | ☐ Prescription medication |
| ☐ Aftersun cream | ☐ Painkillers – paracetamol and/or ibuprofen |
| ☐ Bug repellent | ☐ Antihistamine tablets |
| ☐ Wet wipes | ☐ Anti-itch creams for bug bites |
| ☐ Deodorant | ☐ Anti-diarrheal medications |
| ☐ Electrolytes | |
| ☐ Bags for used toilet paper and menstrual products – Ziploc, nappy or bespoke menstrual bags | |



Communicating Toilet Facilities

Communicating Facilities

There are many reasons why fieldworkers may need more regular and more urgent access to toilets. Conditions such as irritable bowel syndrome, inflammatory bowel disease, and pelvic floor sensitivities will affect how often and how urgent someone will need toilet access.

Communicating the type of toilet facilities available on the field day is important for those with mobility issues where squatting may not be possible.

Where Facilities Are Available

- ☐ Make facilities available for the day clear before fieldwork, i.e., Will there be running water and flushing toilets, is the expectation to 'wild-wee' during the working day?
- ☐ Plan 3 sets of "comfort breaks" through the working day and allow for ad hoc toilet breaks when needed. Make clear that anyone can ask for an extra toilet break at any time and there are no restrictions to only stick to the three prescribed breaks.
- ☐ Engage everyone in the conversation - Avoid singling out individuals, especially in relation to perceived gender.

Where Facilities Are Not Available

- ☐ Make this clear **before** deployment to allow for conversations with team members.
- ☐ Engage in conversation and planning of your remote camp facilities i.e.,
 - Setting up of toilet-like facilities – buckets with bin bags, personal or group holes dug in the ground
 - Exclusive toileting outdoors – how to wee outdoors and dispose of toilet paper and/or wet wipes appropriately
 - Rules of toilet use and local guidelines and regulations – Will there be a set location for the group to toilet away from, how to mindful of one another

Four Key Considerations

Privacy



Provide designated toilet spaces where people are unlikely to be disturbed

Waste Management



Make clear how to dispose of toilet paper, menstrual pads and tampons

Personal Kits



Provide emergency supplies of toilet kits i.e., toilet paper and menstrual pads, and encourage attendees to make and bring their own

Clean Water



Where possible providing clean water can reduce risks of infections, especially in remote field camp by allowing hand washing and cleaning of reusable menstrual products



Natures Bathroom: How to Toilet Outdoors

There have been many anecdotal reports of people avoiding toileting in the field due to lack of experience and/or embarrassment.

This is a serious health risk and should be addressed at a pre-deployment meeting as part of the risk assessment.

When camping, designate a spot early for urinating and establish a simple **privacy system** with your group (such as a signal, a flag, or a verbal check). Sorting this early means no awkwardness later.

Assess waste disposal options for your specific site before departure and brief your team clearly. What's appropriate varies by environment.



Safety & Communication



Before heading off on your own, always let someone in your group know:

- Where you're going.
- When you expect to be back.
- In remote areas, wildlife and weather can change quickly. Take a whistle with you whenever you leave the group in case of an emergency.

"How to Go" Urinating



Step 1 Find the right spot: Look for a rock, a dip in the ground or a gully

Step 2 Technique: Pull trousers and underwear all the way down to your ankles before crouching. This significantly reduces mess and is worth doing every time.

In cold weather, bad weather, or if crouching is difficult: A she-wee or similar device allows you to urinate standing up or into a Nalgene bottle. Always trial these devices at home in advance as they can be tricky!

"How to Go" Solid Waste



Where there's no toilet tent or designated facility, here's what to do.

Step 1 Find the right spot: Move well away from any drinking water sources, rivers, streams or lakes.

Step 2 Dig a hole: Use a trowel to dig a small hole in the ground, deep enough to bury waste fully.

Step 3 Bury it: Cover the waste completely with soil when you're done.

Step 4 Pack out your paper: Toilet paper and wet wipes should not be buried. Place them in a sealed Ziploc bag to be disposed of later.

No Shower



Wet wipes are your best friend in the field. Using them after toileting helps you maintain personal hygiene and reduces the risk of conditions like:

- Thrush
- Urinary tract infections (UTIs)

Storing and disposing of wipes: Always keep used wet wipes and toilet paper in a sealed Ziploc bag. Never leave them in the environment.



Natures Bathroom: Managing Menstruation

As well as managing the act of menstruating on fieldwork, the physical symptoms can be debilitating for some and vary through the cycle. Field leaders should also consider the impacts of common gynaecological conditions such as: endometriosis, adenomyosis, PCOS which can cause unpredictable cycles and debilitating pain. It is also important to note not everyone who menstruates experiences what they would categorise as 'unproblematic periods'. There is also no reason why an individual cannot perform at their best during any point in their menstrual cycle – it is very individual. It is important that anyone who may need adjustments feels comfortable asking for them.

Communication

- Menstruation and menstrual product management should be discussed as part of toileting procedures before departure
- All language around menstruation must be matter-of-fact, respectful and inclusive.
- If a field leader does not feel comfortable leading this conversation, they should speak with other senior fieldworkers to find someone who can deliver the information and training on their behalf. No one should miss out on vital healthcare information.
- This discussion should be had with the entire field team. This helps to break down taboos and ensures that colleagues who do not menstruate understand how to support those who do.





Menstrual Products

Menstrual Products

Group first aid kits should include menstrual products as standard:

- Pads in a range of absorbencies
- Hand sanitiser
- Wet wipes
- Toilet paper

A designated **point of contact** should be identified before departure, someone the team knows they can approach discreetly and without judgement to access products.



Disposable Products: Pads & Tampons

If disposable products are your preference, there's no need to change your routine for fieldwork.

- Use a **Ziploc bag** when changing products outdoors, it keeps things contained and hygienic when crouching behind a rock or in a gully.
- **Change products regularly**, this is especially important in the field. Leaving products in for too long can in rare cases lead to **Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS)**.

 **Know the symptoms of TSS:** high fever, a sudden rash, vomiting, dizziness and muscle aches. If you or a teammate experience these symptoms seek medical attention immediately.



Reusable Products: Cups, Discs & Period Underwear

Reusable products like menstrual cups, discs and period underwear are increasingly popular and work well on fieldwork with a little forward planning. They require different cleaning protocols to disposable options:

- Designate and clearly label a pan **exclusively for washing and sterilising** menstrual cups. This should never be shared with cooking.
- Discuss **how to dispose of menstrual waste** for the specific field site in advance.
- Ensure team members have space and **privacy to clean** and change reusable products.

 Always practice before committing to them on fieldwork

Your Needs, Your Choice

The choice of menstrual product is entirely personal. What matters most is that everyone has what they need to manage their period comfortably and safely in the field.

If you need a specific adjustment such as access to a sterilising pan, a set time for privacy, or anything else — speak with your field leader or a trusted teammate. These adjustments are straightforward to accommodate when discussed in advance.



Symptom Management

Symptom Management

Often the **physical symptoms of a period** can also affect fieldwork plans and prevent people from feeling and performing at their absolute best. It's important that fieldwork leaders consider emergency supplies for **symptom easing medications** as well as attendees bringing their own personal first aid kits. Potential symptoms to manage:

- Pain and headaches – Consider bringing **pain relief medication** (paracetamol, ibuprofen, Tylenol, aspirin), encourage proper hydration (support toileting facilities and etiquette), consider migraine and anti-sickness medications
- Nausea and upset stomach – **Make food and snacks available** to eat little and often, promote frequent rests and breaks where needed, **consider anti-sickness and anti-diarrhoea medications**.
- Fatigue - Understanding and **pacing of activities** as well as **promoting good sleep hygiene**. This will benefit **ALL** teams members!

This list is not exhaustive, and team members should be encouraged to **request considerations where needed**. These requests should be met positively by the fieldwork lead and kept confidential.

Symptoms associated with menstruation are not just limited to the bleeding days of the menstrual cycle. Symptoms also become less predictable, often more unpleasant and new symptoms may arise around the perimenopause and menopause. Fieldwork leaders should be aware of these effects, and any reasonable adjustments can be agreed in advance.

There are also a number of options for medically managing periods. The following table should **not** be used as medical advice, but fieldwork attendees may want to

discuss the following options for managing their period in the field with their general practitioner. **!** There should be no expectation from fieldwork leaders that any team members or students take use medical management for their periods. It is a personal choice, and no one should feel pressured (whether directly or indirectly) to take medication. **!**

	Cycle Tracking	Progesterone-Based Contraceptive	Combined Contraceptive	Period Delay Medication
What is it	Planning fieldwork around your period	Contraceptive pill that uses only synthetic progesterone	Contraceptive pill that uses both synthetic progesterone and estrogen	Synthetic progesterone medication prescribed by a doctor or pharmacist for delaying a period
How is it used	Using a period tracker app or calendar - organise fieldwork for when you're not on your period	Used as a regular contraceptive taken every day	Can be taken without a break to prevent a breakthrough bleed under supervision of a GP	When taken 3 days before your period will stop period onset until you stop the medication*
Benefits	Requires no medication and can fit around your personal cycle	Has the potential to lighten or stop periods	Can stop periods for a certain amount of time	Can stop periods for a certain amount of time
Limitations and risks	Only works if you can reliably predict your period, you're the fieldwork organiser and the fieldwork is short-term	Does not stop everyone's periods and can take up to 6 months to settle into a new cycle Can cause side effects including breakthrough bleeding and can increase risks of DVT**	May not work for everyone Can cause side effects and can increase risks of DVT**	May not work for everyone Need to be able to reliably predict your cycle Can cause side effects including breakthrough bleeding and increase risks of DVT**

*Period delay medication can also be taken months in advance to alter your cycle

** **! Altitude & travel note:** Some forms of hormonal contraception may increase the risk of **deep vein thrombosis (DVT)** when travelling to altitudes above **4,500m** or using air travel. Discuss this with your GP if either applies to your fieldwork.

Wrapping Up

Managing toileting and menstruation in remote and outdoor environments is something that every field team can handle well — with the right preparation, open conversations, and a no-nonsense attitude.

Key Takeaways

Plan ahead. Designate toilet spots early, pack the right products, and make sure everyone knows the disposal guidelines for your specific site before you leave.

Talk openly. Whether it's letting a buddy know you're heading off for a bathroom break or discussing menstrual product needs with your field leader, clear communication keeps everyone safe, comfortable and supported.

Include everyone. Toileting and period management affect the whole team. Briefing everyone together breaks down taboos, reduces awkwardness in the field, and means that no one is left without the information they need.

Respect individual needs and choices. There is no single right way to manage toileting or menstruation in the field. The field leader's role is to ensure that everyone has access to the products, facilities and adjustments they need.

Look out for each other. Know the signs of TSS, carry a whistle, tell someone where you're going, and check in on your teammates. Good fieldwork is team work.

 *A well-prepared team is a confident team. These conversations might feel awkward at first but having them before you leave makes everything easier once you're out there.*

References

Nash, M., Nielsen, H.E., Shaw, J., King, M., Lea, M.A. and Bax, N., 2019. "Antarctica just has this hero factor...": Gendered barriers to Australian Antarctic research and remote fieldwork. PLoS One, 14(1), p.e0209983. 10.1371/journal.pone.0209983

Nash, M., 2023. Breaking the silence around blood: managing menstruation during remote Antarctic fieldwork. Gender, Place & Culture, 30(8), pp.1083-1103. 10.1080/0966369X.2022.2066635

Walker, C., 2024. It's time to talk about menstruation and fieldwork. Nature, 630(8017), pp.777-779. 10.1038/d41586-024-02021-4

Further Resources

- Greene et al. [Safety and inclusivity in the field](#)
- [COMET fieldwork guide](#)
- [QRA Safety and belonging in the field: A checklist for educators](#)

NHS advice

- [NHS: Contraception fit for travel](#)
- [NHS: delaying my period](#)
- [British Menopause Society](#)
- [Balance App for menopause support](#)
- [Periods - NHS](#) (includes information on adenomyosis, endometriosis, hormone headaches, premenstrual syndrome, polycystic ovary syndrome)
- [Prostate problems - NHS](#)
- [Irritable bowel syndrome \(IBS\) - NHS](#)
- [Coeliac disease - NHS](#)
- [Inflammatory bowel disease \(IBD\) - NHS](#)

Period management

- [The Lowdown – Contraceptive Review Platform](#)
- [ModiBodi – Period Underwear How it Works](#)
- [Field Museum – Periods and Fieldwork](#)
- [Nature – Fighting the Menstruation Taboo in the Field](#)