



OLLSCOIL NA GAILLIMHÉ

UNIVERSITY OF GALWAY

Promoting Menstrual Health among Ladies Gaelic Football Players: Recommendations from Research

The surge in female participation in sports including Ladies Gaelic Football comes with the need to look after players and provide welfare supports. There are a number of existing player welfare programmes implemented within Ladies Gaelic football, but none include the menstrual health. The menstrual cycle is a major part of a female's life which impacts sports performance and engagement. Decision-makers need to implement practical measures to ensure players menstrual health needs are met. This policy brief summarises research conducted into the understanding and experiences of the menstrual cycle among female Gaelic football players and makes recommendations for policy and practice underpinned by this evidence.

What is the issue?

Research on athletes' knowledge and understanding of the menstrual cycle is minimal, especially in the context of team sports. However, the research is clear on the importance of understanding the menstrual cycle in relation to sport and also highlights the need for more evidence to promote menstrual health (Brown et al., 2013; Brown et al., 2014; Larsen et al., 2020).

Why is this issue important?

A major part of the life course of a female athlete is the menarche and the menstrual cycle. Research has long established that the menstrual cycle can impact day-to-day living (Hausmann et al., 2000; Shepherd, 2001), and there is emerging research that it can also impact sports performance (Brown et al., 2021; Findlay et al., 2020; Freemas et al., 2021; Hewett et al., 2007). Research has found that female athletes are predisposed to knee injury at certain phases of their menstrual cycle (Hewett et al., 2007; Oleka, 2020). It has also been found that aerobic ability and muscle power differ over phases of the menstrual cycle (Freemas et al., 2021; Pallavi et al., 2017).

Over training can lead to the cessation of menstruation which, in turn, has been linked to recurring injuries such as stress fractures and early onset osteoporosis (Nattiv, 2007; Southmayd et al., 2019). In the best interests of female athletes, recent research has emphasised the need to communicate between players and coaches about the menstrual cycle. It also recommends the implementation of menstrual cycle protocols and educational developments within sports-specific circles in an attempt to minimise negative impact and to maximise positive outcomes for players (Brown et al., 2021; Findlay et al., 2020). There is no published literature available exploring this issue among female Gaelic football players.

What did the research explore?

Eighteen ladies Gaelic football club and county players took part in four focused group discussions. They shared their understanding and experiences of menstruation, and their recommendations for change.

What were the main findings?

- Players reported poor understanding of menstrual cycle physiology. However, they considered that understanding the menstrual cycle was important for female athletes so that they can understand their bodies and plan ahead for training and matches.
- Players expressed discomfort having conversations with male coaches about their menstrual cycles. They expressed fears of making their male managers uncomfortable by mentioning their menstrual cycle and presumed that male coaches would not understand.
- Online resources including social media, doctors' advice and menstrual cycle tracking apps were the most popular sources of menstrual cycle information for players.
- Players reported both physical and psychological symptoms related to their menstrual cycles and to the use of the contraceptive pill. Menstrual cycle symptoms included cramps, headaches/ migraines, tiredness, low mood, and mood swings.
- Players reported that they underperform at training and during matches while menstruating, stating that they feel that they are not able to perform at 100%.
- The absence of period products, toilet paper and sanitary bins at training facilities was evident and led to worry and frustration among players.
- Players reported feeling self-conscious and distracted due to the possibility of leaking through their shorts.

What are the implications?

There is a broad lack of knowledge and understanding of the menstrual cycle and its implications in sports performance. Players highlighted their awkwardness and reluctance to mention their menstrual cycle and menstrual issues to coaches even if they feel it is impacting their performance. The lack of available period products and sanitary bins, and the limitations on permitted sportswear add to player fears and anxiety during performances.

Key Policy Recommendations

- Leadership: There is a need for leadership in Ladies Gaelic football to develop and support menstrual cycle policy through all levels from club level to national level.
- Education: Menstrual cycle education is required for players and coaches with the emphasis on specific topics such as the menstrual cycle's impact on sport, how to manage the menstrual cycle, and the importance of having a regular menstrual cycle. Education is important to increase awareness of the importance of the menstrual cycle to female athlete health, awareness of symptoms, and strategies that will optimise training and performance.
- Facilities: Having period products and sanitary bins available in the dressing rooms, toilet facilities or team gear bag is essential in order to create a supportive environment for players. This would normalise menstruation in an environment where it has been considered a 'taboo' topic. It would improve psychological safety for players who are not always prepared for menstruation and would demonstrate to players that coaching staff are prepared to attend to all aspects of their health.
- Regulations: Players needs must be met by abolishing rules against the use of undershorts, and the use of white shorts as team kits should be revisited. This would help address the anxiety felt by players during training and matches about leaking menstrual blood.

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