

Sheila de Liz

## GIRL ON FIRE – All About the "Fabulous" Puberty

*Girl on Fire*

- The new book by Germany's most-loved gynaecologist.
- 25,000 copies sold! More than 300,000 of her previous books sold in total!
- Her previous title *Woman on Fire* spent over 100 weeks on the Spiegel bestseller list!
- English sample translation available.



August 2022 · 288 pages

### Everything that girls (and their mothers) need to know about puberty.

Puberty is one of the most defining phases in a girl's life. Many women don't like to recall this turbulent time in which their bodies underwent radical changes, and their moods switched from on top of the world to the depths of despair in an instant. What is new, however, is that girls today are exposed to an unprecedented flood of influences through social media, which ensures even more uncertainty than the hormonal upheaval brings about. It's time for *Girl on Fire*, a different type of sex education book. Dr Sheila de Liz – better known on TikTok as Doctor Sex – uses humour, sensitivity and courage to tackle difficult topics geared towards her target readership, explaining what girls need to know (and often don't dare to ask).

**Dr Sheila de Liz** was born in 1969 in New Jersey, came to Germany at the age of 15 and studied medicine in Mainz. She's been running her own gynaecology and obstetrics practice in Wiesbaden since 2006. She is a recognised expert on everything concerning women's health. Her book *Lips Unsealed* was published in 2019, followed by *Woman on Fire* in 2020 – both became instant bestsellers.

Sheila de Liz

## **GIRL ON FIRE**

English sample translation by Linda Gaus (table of contents and chapter 3)

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Dear Readers,

For us women, the relationship between mother and daughter is one of the most important and formative ones, bar none. This relationship was always complex, and puberty frequently presents special challenges when daughters begin to define their own identity as young women.

Today, we also have to examine the effects of new technologies and the influence of social media. So much has changed since we went through puberty ourselves. We frequently rely on old formulas that we learned from our parents – but these no longer apply today. We want nothing but the best for each other, but sometimes we're just not in a position to choose the right path.

That's why this book is so important, and that's why I gave it to my daughters. Sheila communicates complex biological and scientific concepts in a unique manner – empathetically, with charm and humor. She gives us the knowledge necessary to face this time of change together in a safe and healthy manner so that mothers and daughters can understand each other better and help one another.

Kind regards,

*Clandia [Schiffer]*

### **It's flowing: all about your period**

- Aunt Flo.
- On the rag.
- That time of the month.
- Shark week<sup>1</sup>.

Even if we call your period or menstruation by its real name, freely and completely without shame, I think some of its “code names” are really funny. There’s actually no good reason for the code names. There’s nothing shameful or disgusting about your period; it’s a completely normal part of being a woman. But first things first.

Getting your period for the first time is always exciting. Some girls are happy, others think it’s creepy or unnecessary to find blood in their underwear. If you think about it, you’ll see; it’s actually a sign from nature that your body is ready to have a baby. OK, but Mother Nature must be nuts – we’re not living 5,000 years ago in Ancient Egypt when girls married at 14 and died at 30.

On average, girls get their period for the first time at the age of 12. Some get it earlier – and if you’re a person of color, that might be totally normal. It’s a well-known fact that Black and Brown girls enter puberty, and therefore develop breasts and get their periods, earlier than White girls.

For anyone who’s offended because I’m using the colors Black, Brown, and White: when I lived in the USA, there was the “Black is beautiful” movement, which left a lasting impression on me. Black and White should not be trigger words. We’re all beautiful, we’re all welcome, and we’re all sisters. Mic drop.

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that I have “Americanized” these so that readers in the US are likelier to recognize them.

Your period should come once a month and last five to seven days. The color of the blood ranges from light red to dark red, from a brown to a black smear. Sometimes, the blood is liquid, sometimes it contains clots. For the remaining three weeks of the month, you won't bleed.

Your period can hurt a bit, especially on the first and second days, because sometimes the uterus is contracting to shed the blood. It can also be that you are moody and have headaches before and during your period. These things are all normal to a certain extent, but they shouldn't knock you out too badly.

### **Short answers to dumb questions about all things period (part one)**

When it comes to their periods, many girls are afraid to ask dumb questions. But since there are no dumb questions, only dumb answers, let's look at a few dumb questions--that is, things you've probably always wondered:

#### **1. Dumb question: when can you say that your period is regular?**

**Answer:** If it comes approximately once a month. This means that your period doesn't necessarily have to come every 28 days as you'll read on the internet or as you may have learned in school. In principle, it can also come every 32 or 24 days, or any number of days in between. All of this is normal.

#### **2. Dumb question: Is the brown color normal or did my blood get dirty somehow?**

**Answer:** Brown or even black blood is normal. This happens if the bleeding is relatively slow, and it's discolored by air along the way to your underwear. It's the same thing that happens to an apple slice you leave sitting out on the kitchen counter. The process is called oxidation. (But you don't

need to know that, it's just a fun fact for nerds!) Your blood is never dirty, and the body does not “cleanse” itself when it bleeds. Don't let anyone talk you into saying that.

3. Dumb question: Everyone talks about cramps and other problems, but I don't have any of that. Am I normal?

**Answer:** Not every girl HAS to have problems with her period. For some girls, bleeding is very easy. And the amount of blood doesn't mean anything either. If your flow is light or stops after three days, there's no reason to get excited. It's all OK, there's no need to worry.

4. Dumb question: What's the slimy stuff in my blood?

**Answer:** Don't worry, that's clotted blood, not skin or tissue.

I've had girls in my office (who were already sexually active) who were afraid that this was a miscarriage . I promise – a miscarriage is not a clump that just comes out. The bleeding from a miscarriage is also nothing like the trickle during your period – it's usually more like a flood of the century. If you're bleeding a lot and it doesn't stop, please go straight to the doctor.

5. Dumb question: Can other people smell when I've got my period?

**Answer:** Dogs, yes. People no. Or only if their nose is wayyy too close to your private parts – which it shouldn't be in the first place. You don't have to use any perfumes or sprays or deodorants during your period, even though products like that are sold to cover up “intimate odors.” We should all give the middle finger to that industry!

6. Dumb question: Why does my butt feel like it's cramping when I get my period?



**Answer:** Not everyone experiences butt cramps, and if they do, they don't have them every time they get their period. There is a kind of period cramp that goes all the way back to the anus. A lot of times, because your intestines are next to your uterus, they "play along" during your period –which takes us directly to the next dumb question.

#### 7. Dumb question: Why do I always have diarrhea when I get my period?

**Answer:** Because your hormones often invite your intestines to your period party, and they groove along when your uterus cramps.

### **Tampons, pads, cups, and period panties**

The first thing you'll learn after you get your period is how to manage your blood and your laundry. To do that, there are things that you put in your vagina and things that you put in your underwear. There is even a kind of underwear that acts as a pad – but more about that later.

To start out, you might be most comfortable with a pad. These come in different thicknesses, depending on how much you're bleeding; there are also different ones for use during the day and at night. They all have an adhesive strip on the back that you stick in your underwear. Some also have "wings" so that the blood doesn't run off the pad into your underwear.

You don't have to change your pad every time you go to the bathroom; every four to five hours is enough. By then, the pad will probably be soaked through. If it's soaked through sooner, of course you should change it sooner.

Anyone who is annoyed by pads or just wants to try out something new can try tampons.

### **Inserting a tampon in 6 easy steps**

Step 1: Wash your hands.

Step 2: Unwrap the tampon and pull out the string (it's usually blue).

Step 3: Put your foot on the edge of the bathtub or on the toilet lid and find your vagina.

Step 4: Push the tampon into your vagina – at an angle that's like a slide on a playground (see picture).

Step 5: Push, push, push, until you can't feel anything more. Leave the string hanging out.

Step 6: Wash your hands again.

When you try and put a tampon in for the first time, you may feel like it's not going in. Many women also say that it hurts. There's a trick to avoid this: Don't try to push the tampon straight into your body like a missile shooting toward the moon. If you do that, you may bump against the urethra, and that can twinge. The vagina curves toward the back like a slide, so you should guide the tampon diagonally backward (toward your back) rather than straight toward your belly button. Also make sure that you're bleeding enough. If you're only bleeding a little, your vagina may be too dry. In that case, wait a little while; use a lightweight pad until you're bleeding a little more, then you'll be able to insert a tampon more easily.

Tampons also come in different sizes depending on how heavily you're bleeding. In the beginning – until you're comfortable inserting tampons – I would recommend using small tampons. Over time, you can use bigger ones. If you want to swim or play sports, that's no problem with tampons. The string is hidden even in bikini-style underwear, so it's OK.

### **Toxic shock syndrome**

You should change a tampon every three to four hours; this is especially important because in very, very rare cases, dangerous bacteria can develop, which cause toxic shock syndrome (TSS). This doesn't happen often, but it is associated with fever and the collapse of your circulatory system. It's so rare that you may read social media reports about the very few cases that do occur. So don't panic if you've forgotten your tampon for a while. As long as you're feeling good, it's all good, but do change your tampon as soon as you can. TSS is extremely rare: The probability that you get it is about the same as sitting next to Justin Bieber on an airplane. So there's no reason not to use tampons (or fly on an airplane!)

When you change them – and this applies for tampons and pads too – you should wrap the used items in toilet paper and throw them in the trash. PLEASE don't throw them in the toilet! That's bad for the environment and bad for the sewage system. When the drains back up, your friendly neighborhood plumber will have to come and fish out all of your pads (= cringe).

Speaking of the environment, you might notice over time that menstrual products create a lot of trash. This is due both to the packaging and to the tampons and pads themselves. For anyone who wants to help the environment and save money too, there are great alternatives:

1. **The menstrual cup:** The cup is a cool little thing. It's made of soft plastic, so you can scrunch it up. You push it into your vagina, and it expands there. It forms a vacuum against the cervix, where it remains and catches the blood.

You can easily leave the cup in your vagina all day—that is, you can put it in in the morning and take it out in the evening. After your period is over, put the cup in boiling water (or put it in the microwave for a few minutes) to disinfect it. In the beginning, all of this may take a little practice, but after that, most girls are loyal fans. You can buy cups at drug stores; they cost \$15-30. Also, if you're using a menstrual cup, you can see approximately how much blood you lose during your period. Previously, we thought we only lost 2 teaspoons, but now we know that it's an amount about equal to a capful of fabric softener!

2. **Period panties:** This type of underwear is a true multitasker. It looks like a normal pair of panties, but instead of putting a pad in, the underwear IS the pad. This means that you can simply bleed into the panties, and they absorb the blood. You stay dry. Your pants, your bedsheets – everything is protected. After that, you wash the period panties normally in the washing machine, just like normal underwear.

Period panties can cost \$15-60, but I would pay attention to the quality and not buy the cheap ones – because after all, they’re supposed to hold something.

### Period poverty

We’re talking here about prices as if everyone has the money for these things. I can remember days when I didn’t have any money for pads, and I had to create an emergency solution out of toilet paper and my mother’s cotton pads. Nobody knew (you, my readers, are the first ones I have told about this), because I was ashamed – which is too bad, because there’s no reason to be. If you’re in a similar situation, turn to a good friend, a teacher you trust, your gynecologist, or a women’s organization such as Period.org or the Alliance for Period Supplies. And if you notice that a friend needs help, keep some pads or tampons on hand and give them to her! Let’s work together to end period poverty!

#### The pinky glove

Two friends of mine developed the first period panties in Germany and appeared on the German version of Shark Tank. The (mostly male) judges turned up their noses and didn’t believe that anyone would buy something like that, so my friends didn’t get the nod. A few months later, two men (!!!) came along and brought something along that the jury thought was THE shit: the pinky glove. A PINK glove (because it has to appeal to women! And of course they all love PINK and unicorns, and stuff like that!) for removing tampons, so that you don’t have to touch your vagina and blood (OMG!!!). Instead, you can pull the tampon out with the glove and wrap the whole mess so you can dispose of it “cleanly” and “discreetly,” but especially without having to confront male roommates – or any men at all – with your blood. Otherwise, those poor men might have to know that you BLEED from your VAGINA. Absurd. Not to mention the additional burden on the environment... And how did the MALE jury react to the two MEN who wanted to explain to us stupid women how we should manage our disgusting periods? Wait for it... Of course they WON. Then, girls all across Germany had just one question for the Sharks, namely WHAT THE FUCK???

The whole thing went viral and there was a shitstorm of biblical proportions. Both mansplainers had to return their prize and apologize publicly.

The good news after this mega-fail: Sales of my friend's period panties went through the roof. Power to the period people!!

### Short answers to dumb questions about all things period (part two)

#### 1. Dumb question: Can I leave a tampon in overnight?

**Answer:** since you're supposed to change the tampon every four hours, some girls ask whether they need to set their alarm clocks at night to take the tampon out. Since the tampon companies don't want to advise on this, they don't say anything, but let's keep it real: if you are bleeding a lot, of course you should change the tampon at night. Otherwise, you can keep it in until you wake up and you don't have to set your alarm clock.

#### 2. Dumb question: Does using tampons mean you're more likely to get infections?

**Answer:** Many girls don't trust themselves to use tampons because they're afraid of Toxic Shock Syndrome, so they just don't go to the pool when they're on their period. However, infections don't happen so easily! A lot of bacteria live in the vagina, including ones that are good and belong there and act like superheroes to fight off other stupid bacteria. Still, you should always wash your hands before inserting a tampon, especially if you've just been riding a bus or if you've been out and about a lot. Toxic Shock Syndrome is extremely rare – too rare to be afraid to go to the pool.

3. Dumb question: You can't get a tampon in if you've never had sex, right? And isn't it a bad idea to use them if you're still a virgin?

**Answer:** You can absolutely use tampons even if you've never had sex. Don't worry--you can't break anything!

4. Dumb question: Does the size of the tampon say anything about how much sex you've had? Are thicker tampons designed for wider vaginas?

**Answer:** No. The size of the tampon only reflects how much you're bleeding; in theory, tampons should fit in any vagina.

5. Dumb question: How can I wash blood spots out?

**Answer:** With sparkling water! It's best to rinse them as quickly as possible and then wash them.

6. Dumb question: If I'm out and about with my menstrual cup, how can I clean it? (In a restaurant, for example.) I don't just want to rinse it in the sink.

**Answer:** Pee on it! Urine is very clean. Then you can put it back in.

7. Dumb question: OK, I'm probably the only one, but I've never even put a finger in my vagina. So I don't trust myself to use a tampon.

**Answer:** Trust yourself. Your vagina is not scary--it's your friend. If you can stick a finger up your nose, you can also stick one up your vagina. It's really that simple.

8. Dumb question: If I keep tampons in my purse for too long, sometimes the plastic wrapper comes off. Are they still clean? Can I still use them, or is it better not to?

**Answer:** If the tampon is already dirty, I would throw it away and not use it. It's best to keep tampons and pads in a little bag or box or just take an empty tissue wrapper and put them in there.

### **Help, this shit hurts!**

We've already learned that sometimes you can have lower abdominal cramps when you get your period; to a certain extent, this is normal. But what happens if you miss several days of school once

a month because you have menstrual cramps? There's definitely something we can do about that!

You don't have to have menstrual cramps.

What do menstrual cramps feel like? They come in waves, like any other cramp, and can occur below the belly button or on one side or another of your lower abdomen. Sometimes, you may feel them in your back or legs, or just in one leg. For a few girls, the pain is so bad that they become nauseous or faint, and they have to go to the ER. But that's the exception.

But why do we get something as unnecessary as cramps? The uterus is a muscle that contracts in order to press the blood out – kind of like squeezing a lemon. So far, so good. But because some girls' uteruses have ADHD, they contract too much and release substances that cause pain into the bloodstream.

### **How to control pain**

1. Put a hot water bottle on your belly.
2. Take pain medication early. Ask your mom for ibuprofen or naproxen. Tylenol, by contrast, is useless and doesn't do anything. It's super important that you take the pain medication as early as possible, and that you don't wait until the pain is unbearable! That's why these medicines exist. Taking them is not dangerous, and it's stupid that they stop working at some point. It's best to take something as soon as you start bleeding!
3. Magnesium! Take a magnesium tablet (available at the drugstore) every day, and you will be in less pain overall.
4. If possible, do something athletic – this increases circulation and can help to make things better quickly.

If menstrual cramps knock you out every month, please go to the doctor. The doctor can prescribe a birth control pill for this – and that usually helps a lot. I have a lot of girls in my practice who are not having sex with boys but who are taking the pill because of menstrual cramps so they don't have to be afraid of their periods. You and your doctor can decide if that's right for you. Your mom or dad can go with you to the appointment if you want and if you don't trust yourself at first.

There's a special type of cramps that feels like menstrual cramps on crack: it's called endometriosis. With this illness, the lining of the uterus ends up all over your abdomen. And because these bits of lining are just that crazy, they bleed with your uterus when it's time for your period. Endometriosis occurs relatively frequently, so if your menstrual cramps are brutal, and they don't get better with the pill, talk to your doctor about endometriosis. It's important to take care of it so you aren't needlessly suffering.

### When to get help

There's so much that's normal about your period – when you get it, how long you bleed, how much blood you lose. But when should you speak up and maybe go to the doctor?

1. If you haven't gotten your period by your 16<sup>th</sup> birthday.
2. If your period still isn't coming regularly (that is, about once a month) after four years.
3. If your period has been regular, but it's not coming anymore or is only coming rarely.
4. If bleeding doesn't stop and it lasts longer than ten days.
5. If your menstrual cramps regularly knock you out and you have to miss school.

We doctors have a lot of tips and tricks to help you in our bag of tricks! Just ask!!

**Ask Frida!** [note to the reader: these are supposed to be text messages]

(Girl)friend: I don't get it.

Frida: What don't you get?

Friend: I just can't get tampons in--it doesn't work. That shit hurts like hell.

Frida: Then use pads instead.

Friend: Nah, those are really gross. They're always leaking.

Frida: Maybe you're not using the right pads?



Friend: I guess... BUT THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEAN. Why are things so easy for you???? How can that be?

Frida: Listen, honey!

Friend: I hate it when you call me that.

Frida: Yeah, yeah. Look, sometimes it's all in your head. I know it sounds dumb, but maybe you're just not ready. I can tell you from experience that it was all unpleasant for me at first. You just have to get used to it. Have you put a finger up there?

Friend: Yes.

Frida: See? Then this has nothing to do with your Aunt Flo. Give yourself some time, it's no problem. And if you really can't wait, try it the next time with a little Vaseline. Maybe that will help. And meditate beforehand! [winking emoji]

Friend: Shut up!

[Wednesday]

Friend: OMG, I think a living creature just fell out of my vag.

Frida: Excuse me, what???

Friend: Yeah, IDK. There was something lumpy in the toilet.

Frida: Ahhhh

Friend: What do you mean, "ahhhh"? WHAT IS IT?

Frida: You scared me, girl! Lololol...don't worry, that's just a blood clot made of skin cells and other shit.

Friend: Is that bad?

Frida: No, honey, that's normal. I get those sometimes too lmaooooo

Friend: Oh, thank God! I wanted to give the thing a name and bury it LMAOO

### Pearls of wisdom for parents

It's a special day when our little ones get their period for the first time, isn't it? I found it truly touching. My Frida got her first period in 5<sup>th</sup> grade during gym class, in the locker room (she'll grouch at me because I'm telling you this now) and she wrote to me: "I got my period!" The other girls banged on the bathroom door – "open up! open up!" – because apparently, they all wanted to see. Since Frida was the first one in her class, the others couldn't imagine what it's like to bleed when you're still a child.

In any case, I was happy and relieved that her period wasn't a real problem for her; she wasn't ashamed and there was no nonsense around it. It was just natural--another step toward growing up.

My mother always hated her period. She bled a lot and always made it sound like a curse that makes you bleed a deluge. My oldest sister experienced this hatred for herself and internalized it. Even today, she has a difficult relationship with her period and associates it with pain, suffering, and fainting, which regularly sends her blood pressure plummeting. I ask myself how much of this is due to the nocebo effect--that is, the negative placebo effect.