# Heavy periods linked to lower GCSE success and increased school absenteeism among UK girls



Recent research has unveiled a concerning link between menstrual health and educational outcomes for schoolgirls, indicating that heavy periods may contribute to lower attendance rates and poorer academic performance, particularly in GCSEs. A study led by the University of Bristol examined the experiences of nearly 2,700 girls aged 13 to 16—within the context of their educational trajectory. Findings reveal that over a third of participants, 36 per cent, experienced heavy or prolonged menstrual bleeding, which was correlated with an average of 1.7 additional days missed from school each year. Furthermore, these girls had a 27 per cent lower chance of achieving five standard passes at GCSE, grades which are often critical for further academic opportunities.

The symptoms reported were not merely inconvenient; over half of the girls also experienced severe menstrual pain. Such debilitating conditions can greatly affect daily activities, with the study highlighting issues stemming from feelings of shame and bullying, struggles with managing symptoms, and challenges accessing toilets during lessons. These findings suggest that the stigma surrounding menstruation exacerbates the problem, with many girls feeling uncomfortable addressing their needs within the school environment.

According to Gemma Sharp, an associate professor of epidemiology at the University of Exeter and supervisor of the research, these dynamics necessitate a cultural shift. She posits that normalising discussions around menstruation and including boys in this dialogue are essential steps. “I think this starts with education—normalising menstruation and including boys in the conversation too so that it’s clear from the off that it’s not something to be ashamed or embarrassed about,” she said.

This need for a shift is underscored by additional studies highlighting broader issues of school attendance. The UK Department for Education states that consistent attendance is crucial for academic success. Year 11 pupils with perfect attendance are nearly twice as likely to achieve a grade 5 in key subjects such as English and Maths, demonstrating the significant impact of regular school attendance on GCSE results. In stark contrast, students with attendance below 90 per cent face reduced prospects for academic achievement, with only 5 per cent of severely absent pupils—those missing more than half their school days—achieving five good GCSEs.

Moreover, insights from the phs hygiene services group indicate that a staggering 65 per cent of students are unable to access toilets freely during school hours, which can exacerbate the stress around managing menstrual health. Tina Leslie MBE, founder of the charity Freedom4Girls, emphasises that “no student should be penalised for a medical issue they can’t control.” She advocates for the provision of free, high-quality menstrual products that cater to various needs. However, she stresses that simply providing products is inadequate without fostering an environment where menstruation is not stigmatised. “We must create environments where menstruation isn’t stigmatised—where students feel safe speaking up, accessing bathrooms, and managing their health without shame,” she added.

Ultimately, addressing this issue requires an integrated approach that combines health education, the availability of resources, and a supportive school environment. As Dr Sharp articulately summarised, listening to girls who are impacted by these issues and providing them with appropriate support is paramount—not just for their health, but for their education and future opportunities.

### Reference Map

1. [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/periods-health-girls-school-attendance-exam-results-b2755847.html), [[2]](https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2024.04.24.24306294v1.full)
2. [[3]](https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/03/why-school-attendance-matters-and-what-were-doing-to-improve-it/), [[4]](https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/school-attendance-analysing-causes-and-impact-in-pursuit-of-solutions/full/), [[5]](https://schoolsweek.co.uk/95-attendance-almost-doubles-chances-of-gcse-pass/)
3. [[6]](https://schoolsweek.co.uk/just-1-in-20-severely-absent-pupils-get-five-good-gcses-study-shows/)
4. [[7]](https://bmcwomenshealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12905-021-01544-6)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/periods-health-girls-school-attendance-exam-results-b2755847.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2024.04.24.24306294v1.full> - A prospective cohort study involving 2,698 adolescent girls found that 36% reported heavy or prolonged menstrual bleeding, which was associated with an average of 1.7 additional school days missed annually. The study also observed a 27% lower likelihood of achieving five standard passes at GCSE for those experiencing heavy or prolonged bleeding, highlighting the impact of menstrual symptoms on school attendance and academic performance.
3. <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/03/why-school-attendance-matters-and-what-were-doing-to-improve-it/> - The UK Department for Education emphasizes the critical role of school attendance in student achievement. Research indicates that Year 11 pupils with near-perfect attendance are almost twice as likely to achieve a grade 5 in English and Maths GCSE compared to those attending 90-95% of the time, underscoring the link between consistent attendance and academic success.
4. <https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/school-attendance-analysing-causes-and-impact-in-pursuit-of-solutions/full/> - An analysis by Nesta reveals a profound impact of school attendance on GCSE attainment. In 2018-2019, 84% of pupils with perfect attendance achieved a standard pass in English and Maths, compared to less than 50% for those with 10% absence. The report highlights the significant correlation between attendance rates and academic performance.
5. <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/95-attendance-almost-doubles-chances-of-gcse-pass/> - Government research indicates that Year 11 pupils with over 95% attendance are nearly twice as likely to achieve a grade 5 in English and Maths GCSE compared to those attending 90-95% of the time. Missing just ten days in Year 11 reduces the likelihood of achieving these grades by around 50%, emphasizing the importance of regular school attendance.
6. <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/just-1-in-20-severely-absent-pupils-get-five-good-gcses-study-shows/> - A study reveals that only 5% of pupils who were severely absent during exam years (missing over half of school days) achieved at least five good GCSEs. In contrast, 78% of those with rare absences obtained five good GCSEs, highlighting the detrimental effect of severe absenteeism on academic outcomes.
7. <https://bmcwomenshealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12905-021-01544-6> - A longitudinal study in Uganda found that menstrual pain was strongly associated with school absenteeism among adolescent girls. On days when girls reported pain, 21.7% missed school, compared to 8.3% on days without pain, indicating the significant impact of menstrual symptoms on school attendance.