SERE Feminine Hygiene Tips

Female Soldiers should develop a plan to maintain their hygiene in the field before training begins. In this respect, it is no different than the food you will eat, the shelter you will use, or the routes you will follow. Advance planning improves a Soldier's ability to manage hygiene needs in the field. The plan should account for the likely conditions in the field, such as temperature, humidity, water availability, vegetation, group size, and privacy. Females Soldiers may face two common hygiene-related concerns in the field: [1] a vaginal infection due to an imbalance of bacteria in the vagina and, [2] a urinary tract infection (UTI). Prompt recognition and treatment of UTI symptoms is important because an untreated infection may worsen to the point that it requires medical evacuation. Uncomplicated UTI symptoms can be treated by SERE medical staff if students report their symptoms before they worsen.

1. **Due to the physically and mentally demanding nature of SERE training, combined with calorie restriction and increased stress hormone levels, many female students experience disruptions to their normal hormone cycles.** This can lead to unexpected menstrual changes, such as:

- Menstrual bleeding starting earlier than expected
- Longer-than-normal menstrual bleeding
- Breakthrough bleeding for individuals using birth control methods that normally prevent menstruation

Some students may experience a prolonged menstrual cycle that begins earlier than expected and lasts throughout the remainder of their training. To prepare for these potential changes, Soldiers should bring a full 21-day supply of feminine hygiene products. Plan for feminine hygiene needs for every day of the course.

2. **TIPS:**

A. Use a "pee rag," such as Kula Cloth (https://kulacloth.com/). Females will inevitably have a few drips after urinating in the field. If there is a lack of paper products available, use a rag or bandana. After each use, hang it on the outside of your pack/kit to dry out. You can rinse the cloth at every water crossing and allow it to air dry between uses. Another method uses a pee funnel such as the Sani-Fem Freshette (https://www.rei.com/product/407267/sani-fem-freshette-feminine-urinary-director?cm_mmc=aff_AL-_-167207-_-209007-_-NA&avad=209007_c1df5d32d). Using this product, you will not have to squat in the woods. You also do not have to worry about exposing your backside. Look for a funnel that has a good seal. We recommend carrying your funnel wrapped in a rag. You can also use the rag to wipe after urinating. To rinse, run some water through the system. Avoid using unpurified water as there is a risk of exposure to disease or pollution. Take the time for a few "practice runs" at home before utilizing this product in the field.

B. Wear comfortable underwear that will promote a dry environment, as bacteria and yeast are better able to grow in moist environments. Cotton underwear is the most comfortable because it is breathable. However, it may not foster a dry environment because of its long dry time, especially when trapped under your pants. Active performance underwear is typically made mostly of polyester or merino wool, spandex, and nylon. Merino wool may be your best option because synthetic underwear is like synthetic clothing—it smells after 10 minutes of exercise, whereas wool is naturally more odor-resistant. Lighter colored underwear is also recommended so that you can see, rather than mask, what you are cleaning. You have lots of good bacteria in your vagina that keep its delicate, self-regulating environment fully

functioning. Maintaining good bacteria is just as important as avoiding harmful bacteria. Maintaining field hygiene - not complete cleanliness - is the practical objective during SERE training. A strategy is to swap a panty liner each day and pack out the used ones. When conditions and privacy permit, allowing the genital area to air dry briefly may improve comfort.

C. Although stopping to urinate may be inconvenient, delaying urination may increase discomfort and health risk. Women have a shorter urethra than men, so pathogens have a shorter distance to cover before causing an infection. Additionally, the urethra is closer to the rectum in females than in males. Suppose you are dehydrated or just trying to avoid urinating in the field. In that case, you will increase your risk of a UTI because you are not adequately flushing your system. The concern with a UTI is that, if not adequately treated, it could spread from the bladder into your kidneys.

D. Having your period when outside can be inconvenient, annoying, and painful. However, for most females coming through our course, it is impossible to plan attendance around that time of the month. If actively menstruating, remember that you will need to pack out everything that you bring with you. Use a separate resealable bag (double bag if you can) and sprinkle some baking soda inside to absorb odor. Bring double the amount you think you will need because running out to the store is not an option. A menstrual cup is also an option that is waste-free, such as the MeLuna menstrual cup (https://meluna-usa.com/buy-now/menstrual-cup-in-amethyst-purple-classic-firmness/). These silicone cups can stay in for up to 12 hours without odor or discomfort and are reusable. When you need to empty the cup, dig a hole in the ground, dump the contents, and use some water to rinse it out. You can also boil water (if authorized) to clean your menstrual cup. Never rinse in bodies of water due to the possibility of disease as well as pollution. It is recommended that you gain experience using this device in the comfort of your home for a few weeks before utilization in the field.

E. Extended time in the field can make it difficult to maintain ideal hygiene practices. Shaving or waxing, particularly of coarse or curly hair, can increase the risk of ingrown hairs. Ingrown hairs can become painful, infected, and require medical attention, which may be difficult to access in the field. To minimize these risks during the course, we recommend avoiding shaving or waxing in the weeks leading up to and during field exercises. This reduces the likelihood of ingrown hairs developing while in the field.