

Contents

News Story: Norovirus.....	2
Features Story: Menstruation.....	4

Norovirus Cases well-above season norms for January 2026

Target Publication: BBC

Norovirus cases in England have increased by 47% in the first 2 weeks this year, according to the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA). This has been a nationwide spread, with a prevalence of those infected being aged 65 years and over. This has put pressure on the NHS, and while this remains at expected levels, flu vaccines are recommended for those who are particularly vulnerable.

During the Christmas season, flu levels had reduced and stabilised, with an average rate of just under 20%. However, UKHSA has urged people to prioritise hygiene, as norovirus laboratory reports show that norovirus is currently 13% higher than the 5-season average for the same period. Researchers suggest that reduced exposure during COVID-19 restrictions lowered immunity, which has led to stronger and more symptomatic viruses. This highlights the continuous impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on infection rates.

Dr Conall Watson, Consultant Epidemiologist at UKHSA, notes, “People are returning to work and school after Christmas and this gives respiratory viruses like flu more chances to spread.”

Hospital data reflects this impact. The number of hospital beds has gradually risen since the end of November 2025. The 45% increase in occupied hospital beds due to Norovirus highlights the reversal of December’s relatively stagnant numbers. The sustained pressure on senior adult wards aligns with UKHSA findings that people over 65 are particularly vulnerable.

Number of hospital beds occupied due to Norovirus 2025-26

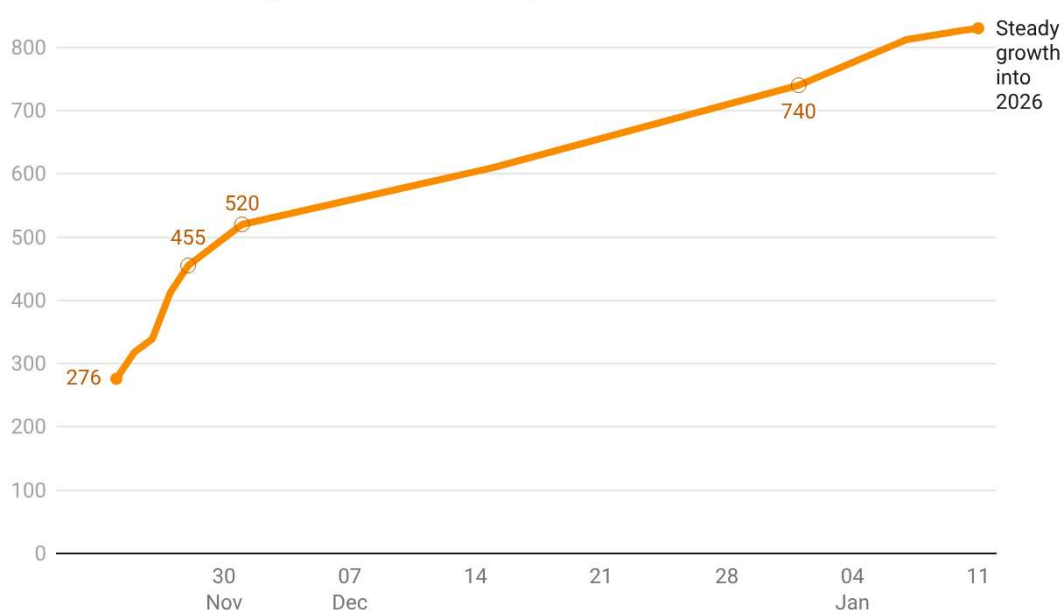


Chart: Anika Sharma • Source: NHS England • Created with Datawrapper

<https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/zA1xR/1/>

scientific paper published in Atlanta, US, stated how older patients in hospitals are more likely to contract viruses like norovirus. This means that those who are admitted into hospital are at a greater risk of infection.

Geographically, the rise of norovirus varies. The map of England below highlights clusters in regions with dense populations and larger hospitals. While it is usual to see that cities are most affected by norovirus, the highest reported seems to be in the North West, North East and West Midlands. While there are many reasons for this difference, it centres around health inequalities and the density of the population.

Norovirus cases across England in 2026

Circle size represents reported Norovirus cases per 100,000 people.

Region

East Midlands East of England London North East North West South East
South West West Midlands Yorkshire and The Humber

Norovirus rate per 100,000 (2026)



<https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/VDNu4/1/>

Amy Douglas, Lead Epidemiologist at UKHSA, reminds people to understand symptoms. “If you have diarrhoea and vomiting, don’t return to work, school or nursery until 48 hours after your symptoms have stopped”, and be aware that norovirus can contaminate food. With cases still rising, the next fortnight of surveillance data will determine whether England is heading towards a stronger norovirus season or leaving it in January.

Word Count: 405 words

The Price We Have to Pay for Periods: The Financial and Mental Impact of Menstruation on Students

Target Publication: The Independent

Evening has arrived, and you're leaving your last lecture, ready to go home. Suddenly, you feel your period start- and you have no sanitary products with you. You hurry to the university's bathroom and find a sign saying, 'Sanitary towels are provided at reception'. Reception is across campus. Now, you must rely on the kindness of strangers or yourself to buy sanitary products from the nearest shop.

This scenario is familiar to more than half of the students in UK schools. Period products are essential, yet their affordability and accessibility are far from guaranteed. As inflation pushes up everyday costs, the instability, combined with limited policy intervention, keeps period poverty an issue that is best kept under wraps. Add the impact on academic performance, and menstruation becomes an overlooked barrier to education. However, with new research emerging on menstruation's effects, could 2026 mark the beginning of the end of the stigma around menstruation?

The Cost of Having a Period

In January 2021, the UK Government abolished the 5% 'tampon tax' after Britain's exit from the European Union. While the change should have reduced prices of sanitary products, the benefit largely went to retailers, who only dropped their prices marginally to maintain greater profit.

Consumer Price Index data for 2025 shows just how unstable sanitary product prices have been.

Inflation on sanitary products, 2023-2025

CPI shows the fluctuating costs of menstrual products over the last couple of years



Chart: Anika Sharma • Source: ONS • Created with Datawrapper

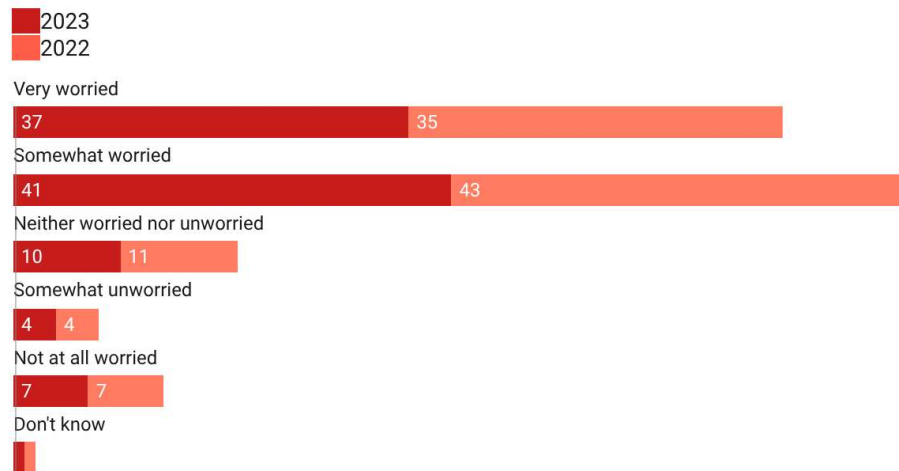
<https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/52yLK/1/>

At their peak, in January 2025, prices rose 18% from the base year. Although monthly fluctuations appear small, the overall inconsistency highlights a deeper issue- essential products should not be subject to such unpredictability. This demonstrates the need for a change, especially with the prevalence of period poverty in the UK.

Rose Stephenson, Director of Policy and Advocacy at the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), recently published 'The Hidden Impact of Menstruation in Higher Education'- the only major report published focusing specifically on menstruation among students. Her findings illustrate the scale of the problem.

Stephenson explains, “ I saw that 1 in 6 students had experienced period poverty, but interestingly half of those students were missing lectures because of period poverty,”, adding that the results shocked her.

How worried are students about the cost-of-living crisis?



Source: ONS • Created with Datawrapper
<https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/H3W7d/1/>

Zooming out, the cost-of-living crisis has steadily intensified financial pressure, with more than 3 in 4 students feeling worried about daily costs. Stephenson points to Scotland’s legislation to include free sanitary products. This means every bathroom across higher education facilities has different types of sanitary products. “Well yeah- as you should”, she says.

But the financial burden is only half of the story. Stephenson also mentions the mental toll of menstruation, noting the reduced focus, concentration, and fatigue. Managing these symptoms alone without support is stressful in itself. “There’s the expense that those students are experiencing by missing out and not going to university.” she notes.

According to HEPI’s report, students are reported to miss an average of 10 school days a year because of menstruation. Long-term, this is bound to affect knowledge, confidence, as well as future detrimental impacts on careers and employment.

7 in 10 students also report difficulty concentrating because of menstrual pain. As Stephenson emphasises, “The less we’re going to stop being embarrassed about it, we’re not going to make progress.” Stigma remains one of the biggest barriers to students seeking help.

Let's Talk About It: Public Attitudes

Social attitudes are not as clear-cut as the financial impacts. Menstruation appears to be more complicated, according to YouGov data, showing that 2 in 3 support a legal duty for free period products. Yet, despite the low rate of responses that state they feel embarrassed buying period products, almost half said they avoided sports during their period- a sign that stigma still exists.

From Embarrassment to Empowerment: Comparing Responses to Menstruation

YouGov Survey responses of over 1,500 adults on period poverty, 2022

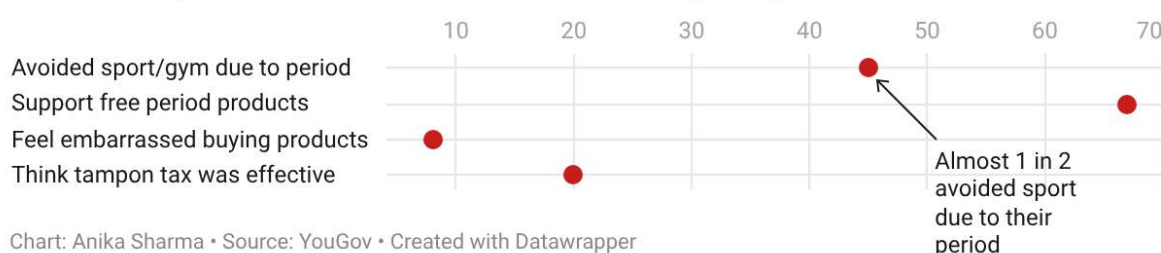


Chart: Anika Sharma • Source: YouGov • Created with Datawrapper

<https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/Bm1fU/1/>

The same survey reveals uncertainty about whether policy changes- such as abolishing the tampon tax- have made any real difference to prices on sanitary products.

Gemma Sawyer, a Research Associate at the University of Bristol, says her survey was based on asking adolescents about the absences they had due to pain or menstruation. Sawyer was most surprised “that heavy bleeding was that impactful, and also that it was experienced by about 1/3 of the adolescents.”, highlighting the additional effort many young people have to put into their education.

Sawyer warns that stigma can be potentially dangerous: “The more secrecy there is, the less knowledge and understanding there is. And then people suffer with things that they don’t need to suffer with”

Both Sawyer and Stephenson hope their research will influence UK Government policy to increase education on menstruation for all students, not just female. They both also hope that teachers are taught about the impacts of menstruation on academic work.

In terms of accessibility, the UK Government needs to ensure they follow suit with Scotland’s policy of free period products that are both available and easily accessible. Until then, it is up to us to decide when to break the silence around menstruation in education.

Word Count: 808 words

Interviews:

Rose Stephenson (Director of Policy and Strategy, Higher Education Policy Institute):

r.stephenson@hepi.ac.uk

Gemma Sawyer (Research Associate - Wellcome Trust Transition Fellowship):

gemma.sawyer@bristol.ac.uk