

Women's Health On board



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Part 1: Periods and Pregnancy

When we bought *Kate*, our Newport 41, and began preparing to sail across the South Pacific eleven years ago I was 30. I had some sailing experience and completed ocean passages on large power boats, but the prospect of sailing a small boat across a big ocean overwhelmed me. To ease my anxiety, I researched everything.

There was lots of information about what galley equipment to buy, medical supplies that would come in handy, and safety gear that was essential. However, there was little in the way of advice about family planning, feminine hygiene on a boat, and how your

menstrual cycle may affect life on board. I spent a decade navigating these private issues on my own and think it's time we brought the conversation out of the shadows and into the cockpit. I found ten women sailors who not only agree with me, but generously shared their time, stories and advice.

FAMILY PLANNING

Over the past decade there has been a sharp rise in young women choosing the full-time sailing life. Family planning, or rather the lengths we go through to avoid getting pregnant, is a real concern for the voyaging sailor. When I moved onto *Kate* I had been taking the birth control pill for several years. However, having worked on power yachts I knew I was prone to occasional bouts of seasickness. We had no intention of starting a family during our journey, and I did not relish the thought of starting one unintentionally.

After consulting with my doctor, I decided to switch to an intrauterine device (IUD). Although no one I knew was using one at the time I discovered that this type of birth control is popular among women sailors. Sheridan, vlogger and veterinarian of www.vettails.com who is sailing in Central America, had this to say about choosing an IUD. “I had already been using it as it often stops your periods, and I have endometriosis so was getting severe cramping and unusual bleeding. But for a boat it is very convenient in that it can be inserted at your trusted doctor’s clinic and then will remain effective for five years.”

Not all IUDs arrest menstruation, nor is it the right fit, sometimes literally, for all women. I chose an IUD because I was worried about being seasick while on an oral contraceptive, but many women still prefer the birth control pill.

Like any medication that is taken daily it is important to keep an ample supply on board so that you don’t run out. In many countries we’ve sailed medications are available without a doctor’s prescription, simply take your empty packet to the pharmacy. However, the specific hormone combination you take may not be available, or you may have to switch to a generic brand. It does pay to stock up, but like all prescription drugs, only if you can store them in a cool place to avoid spoilage.

Some of the women I spoke to preferred non-hormonal methods of birth control, simply opting to use condoms. Although condoms are available everywhere, you might have to think outside the box to find them. I was recently told by a male sailor that when he finally found condoms in the Philippines it was in the hardware store, of all places.

There is no one method of birth control that will fit every woman. It is important to listen to your body, consult your physician, and make an educated and responsible decision for yourself.

PLANNING A FAMILY

Attracted by the freedom, intense family time, and flexibility that the sailing life offers, perhaps now more than ever couples are deciding to start their families on board. Having a family on a boat can be very rewarding. However, being pregnant on board comes with a unique set of difficulties.

Danielle, sailor and captain of a 50-metre motor yacht, got pregnant in the middle of a busy Mediterranean charter season. “The reason I knew I was pregnant was because I started to get seasick, which I never had before. One night I had to ask my partner to cover part of my watch, because I was so sick.”

Elayna, from the very popular vlog [Sailing LaVagabonde](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvVgVgVgVgVgVgVgVgVgVg) had a different experience. “I think I got really lucky with my pregnancy because I only experienced morning sickness a total of three or four times for the duration, which I was dreading having to deal with. So, I managed to dodge that bullet.” She adds, “I did, however, experience serious fatigue. To the point where I had to go to bed as soon as we’d set sail, at least 50 percent of the time.”

As for advice for expectant mothers, Danielle recommends researching doctors and medical facilities in the country you are in so to avoid the unexpected situation she found herself in. “I could not get in to see ANY doctor in France. I was finally able to go for a scan in Italy, but I did not see any medical



Danielle.

professional until 12 weeks and as this was my first pregnancy, it was a little stressful.”

Elayna adds, “If any women are pregnant and concerned about certain mosquito diseases like I was (the Zika virus, as it can cause birth defects) I recommend calling up the public hospital at each island who then puts you onto the person who handles the mosquito disease control in each island and country. I gathered all the information I needed from them.”

GOING GREEN WHILE IN THE RED

It is estimated that the average woman throws away 125-150 kgs of used menstrual waste in her lifetime. Many pads and tampons are made using chemicals that harm the environment, and most wrappers, applicators, and adhesives contain plastic. Add to that the storage and proper disposal of used menstrual products when sailing and its no wonder that many women are looking for greener solutions for those red days.

A low-impact product that has been around

for decades but is gaining popularity is the menstrual cup. Made of medical grade silicon the cup is inserted internally and is designed to be washed and reused. Most women who switch to using a menstrual cup rave about them. Kika, the vlogger behind [SailingUma](#) said, “When I started sailing, I started using the Menstrual Cup. I love how easy and safe they are, doesn’t take any space, and doesn’t create any trash.” Elayna adds, “This really lowered our waste output and made things a lot easier and cleaner onboard when managing my cycle each month.”

Menstrual cups come in different styles and sizes, so it might take a few tries to find the brand that fits you best. Some women find the rinsing out/reinserting difficult when ashore using public washrooms. A good solution is to bring a bottle of water with you, that way you can do everything in the privacy of the bathroom stall, and you are using a clean water source.

Danielle, a cervical cancer survivor, tried using a menstrual cup but found it



uncomfortable post surgery. Still interested in low-impact period products she turned to a relatively new idea; period panties. Constructed out of layers of moisture absorbing materials these washable, reusable underpants basically function as a menstrual pad, without all the garbage, let alone the discomfort. “Previously I always used tampons, but since my surgery (radical trachelectomy) have not been able to use tampons, tried a cup but that was not good for me either. I got so sick of pads, so I tried out the underwear. Although they are expensive I will never go back to pads!”

If you choose to use disposable menstrual products there are still ways you can reduce your environmental impact and waste. Buying organic cotton pads and tampons is not only better for your body, it supports an industry that avoids using harmful pesticides on crops and bleach during manufacturing. A lot of the garbage associated with menstrual products is in the packaging, so look for sanitary napkins that are not individually wrapped in plastic. Another great way to reduce waste, and storage space, is to switch to tampons without applicators. Many of these environmentally conscious brands and products are not available in developing

countries, so stock up when available.

When disposing of used menstrual products do so mindfully and responsibly. Sheridan notes, “I try to ensure they go into a marina bin where I know they will be disposed of with more care, or I place them in proper sanitary disposal units.” In more remote areas, where these are not options, make sure you dispose of your own garbage in a proper bin where an animal is not likely to open the bag. Or, to guarantee it isn’t tampered with and properly disposed of, burn your garbage. And, it should go without saying by now, never throw garbage overboard.

UNDERWAY, PERIOD

By the time most of us step foot on a boat we are well versed in dealing with PMS, cramps, and the aches and pains of our periods. However, the stress and movement of sailing can add to your monthly discomfort. Sheridan discovered that “just the general annoyances of getting cramps, bleeding, and using menstrual products seems that much harder on a boat.” So, what do you do when “Aunt Flo” decides to crew for a week?



Like many women Kika is bothered by menstrual cramps but finds comfort in light physical activities. “When it comes to cramps, I found some yoga poses and hot tea usually helps. The four poses I found that help stretch the muscles and release the abdominal and lower back pain are: downward dog, cobra, camel pose, child pose.”

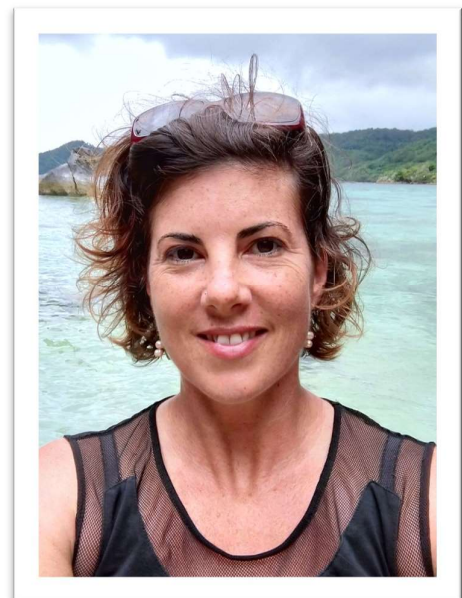
Carolyn, a western trained nurse who is sailing in the Caribbean, takes a holistic approach, “I seek natural remedies; rest, positivity, and being ok with actually feeling my body, with what ails me.” Carolyn also suggests following a balanced diet, and perhaps taking vitamin supplements. “It is tough to find fresh green veggies/meat at times, which are necessary for iron replacement. Good nutrition helps not only hormones, but as a blood building staple, and so much more.”

If you are sailing with a partner or other crew members it is important to be open and honest with them. Tensions can quickly arise if you expect other people to take on extra work or shifts underway without explanation. Discussing your menstrual cycle and how it affects your day-to-day activities is not



something you need to be ashamed or embarrassed of, and neither should your crew mates.

As I discovered, there is a great community of women sailors who are willing to share their stories, offer advice and provide support. It can feel scary and vulnerable to ask for help but your health is worth the few minutes of discomfort. Connecting with other women is a wonderful way to navigate the changes, problems and concerns we all experience.



HEATHER FRANCIS is originally from Nova Scotia, Canada. She and her Aussie partner, Steve, bought their Newport 41, *Kate*, in California in 2008 and have been sailing fulltime since. They are currently in the Philippines looking for wind. You can follow their adventures at: www.yachtkate.com