

Period Problems

Women can have a variety of problems with their menstrual periods. Some common problems are premenstrual syndrome, painful periods, very heavy periods and no periods. Lifestyle changes and medicines may help period problems.

Premenstrual syndrome

Premenstrual syndrome (PMS) or premenstrual tension (PMT) refers to physical and emotional symptoms that some women experience in the one to two weeks before menstruation.

PMS may be due to changes in hormones and brain chemicals that occur during the menstrual cycle, combined with life's tensions.

Physical symptoms include:

- Fluid retention (e.g. bloated abdomen, swollen fingers and ankles)
- Food cravings
- Tender, swollen breasts

- Weight gain
- Aches and pains
- Headache
- Constipation or diarrhoea
- Tiredness
- Difficulty sleeping
- Being clumsy or uncoordinated
- Skin problems (e.g. pimples, acne).

Emotional symptoms include:

- Feeling irritable, sensitive
- Feeling sad, depressed, hopeless
- Anxiety
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Lower libido
- Poor concentration

- Less interest in work and social life
- Wanting to be alone.

The timing of symptoms will indicate whether or not they are due to PMS. PMS symptoms only occur after ovulation (mid-cycle) and disappear when menstruation starts. Recording daily symptoms on a calendar, or chart over two to three months can help decide whether the symptoms are PMS.

Painful periods (dysmenorrhoea)

Many women suffer from period pain. It is usually a cramping or aching pain across the lower abdomen and may spread to the lower back and legs. Other symptoms may also occur including nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, constipation, headache and lightheadedness. Symptoms usually begin the day before the period and slowly ease after the bleeding starts.

Period pain may be related to increased prostaglandin levels that occur with menstruation. Prostaglandins are hormone-like body chemicals that affect uterine muscle, and can also affect stomach and bowel muscles.

Period pain may also be caused by a medical condition such as fibroids, endometriosis or pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). This is called 'secondary' dysmenorrhoea and is most common in women over 30 years.

Some women who have had period pain find that periods are no longer

painful after pregnancy and childbirth, or while using hormonal contraceptives.

Heavy bleeding (menorrhagia)

Heavy periods are common. Heavy bleeding may be caused by many things including hormone disorders, endometriosis, polyps, fibroids and intrauterine contraceptive devices (IUDs), but often no cause can be found. It is difficult to know how much bleeding is too much, but if it interferes with everyday life, there may be a problem. A period that continues for longer than seven days may also be a sign of a problem. Treatment depends on the cause of the excessive bleeding. A doctor can help find the cause.

No periods (amenorrhoea)

Periods stop during pregnancy, while breast-feeding and after menopause, but they may also stop, or be irregular, for other reasons including low body weight, excessive exercise, stress, travel and medical conditions. A doctor can help find the reason why periods have stopped or are irregular.

Note: If a girl has not had a period by 16 years of age it is important that she check with a doctor.

Medicines

A variety of medicines can help with period problems. Ask a pharmacist or

doctor for advice. Medicines for period problems include:

- Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs e.g. ibuprofen, naproxen, mefenamic acid, aspirin) for relief of pain and menorrhagia. As NSAIDs reduce production of prostaglandins, they may be more helpful than paracetamol for relief of period pain
- Paracetamol for relief of pain
- Hormone therapy (e.g. oral contraceptive pill) for relief of PMS, pain and menorrhagia
- Certain complementary medicines (e.g. calcium and pyridoxine for relief of PMS)
- Anti-depressants for relief of PMS.

Note: Aspirin should not be used by girls under 16 years of age, unless advised by a doctor.

Self care

- Eat regular, healthy meals, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and grain foods. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Exercise at a moderate level for at least 30 minutes on all or most days of the week – exercise can reduce pain and give a feeling of wellbeing.
- Do pelvic floor exercises every day.
- Get plenty of rest and sleep.
- Limit caffeine drinks (e.g. coffee, tea, cola, energy drinks). Caffeine can worsen some symptoms of PMS.

Important

Period pain and problems may be caused by a medical condition. Consult a doctor if you have:

- Period pain for the first time over the age of 25
 - Pain which is severe or long lasting
 - Abnormal vaginal discharge
 - Irregular or heavy vaginal bleeding
 - Vaginal bleeding between periods
 - Pain during sexual intercourse
 - A fever with the pain.
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- Limit alcohol intake.
 - Don't smoke.
 - Wear a comfortable, supporting bra.
 - Use relaxation techniques to help cope with tension and pain.
 - Don't take bad feelings out on other people. Explain how you are feeling so others can understand and help you.
 - Spend time doing something you enjoy.

To help ease period pain

- Massage your lower back and buttocks.
- Place a hot water bottle on your stomach or lower back.
- Lie flat on your back and put a pillow under your knees, or lie on your side and bring your knees up to your chest.

For more information

The Jean Hailes Foundation

Website: www.jeanhailes.org.au

Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia

Website: www.shfpa.org.au

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthinsite.gov.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on
CMI leaflets.

National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26
from anywhere in Australia.

*Pharmacists are medicines experts.
Ask a pharmacist for advice when
choosing a medicine.*

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Always read the label. Use only as directed. Incorrect use could be harmful. If symptoms persist see your healthcare professional

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