

Menstrual Cramps (Dysmenorrhea)

Description

Menstrual cramps or *dysmenorrhea* involves pain or discomfort during menstruation. It is the most common type of menstrual problem. If you suffer from dysmenorrhea, you are not alone. Over 50% of menstruating women experience cramps. In addition, a substantial number of women become incapacitated from menstrual pain for some period of time each month.

Symptoms

With pain usually peaking on the first or second day of flow, cramp sufferers may experience one or several of the following symptoms:

- Abdominal pain
- Fainting
- Headaches
- Tension
- Back & leg pain
- Swelling/bloating
- Diarrhea
- Fatigue
- Dizziness
- Depression

What causes cramps?

Depending on the causes, dysmenorrhea can be "primary" or "secondary."

PRIMARY DYSMENORRHEA

This most common type of cramping occurs in women with no apparent physical ailments. Studies show that the cause of menstrual pain in these women usually come from prostaglandins. Prostaglandins are hormones, some of which may cause muscle fibers in the uterine wall to contract (i.e., as during labor). Prostaglandins may also play a part in constricting blood vessels and activating the large intestine, thus explaining the headaches, dizziness, hot and cold flashes, diarrhea, and nausea that can accompany a period. Primary dysmenorrhea tends to develop in women early in adolescence.

SECONDARY DYSMENORRHEA

For women with secondary dysmenorrhea, their menstrual pain or discomfort is usually the result of a particular disease or disorder. Examples of these disorders which may cause secondary dysmenorrhea are:

- Endometriosis
- Ovarian cysts
- Fibroids
- Cancer
- Pelvic Inflammatory Disease

Treatment

Some women find that their dysmenorrhea responds to simple over-the-counter (OTC) medications such as Tylenol, aspirin, Advil, Motrin, or Aleve. Prescription medications may be needed for patients who do not respond to the OTC medicines.

Oral contraceptives also assist in decreasing dysmenorrhea in some women. Ask your provider about this option.

Other Tips

Try the following tips to help further reduce menstrual pain:

- **APPLY A HEATING PAD TO YOUR ABDOMEN**
- **EXERCISE REGULARLY** - A consistent regimen of swimming, jogging, etc., may reduce cramps.
- **REDUCE STRESS** - Stress can aggravate cramps. Try yoga or other relaxation techniques.
- **KEEP YOUR BLADDER EMPTY** - urinate every two hours whether you feel the need or not. The pressure of the bladder against the uterus can increase cramping.
- **TAKE OTC MEDICATIONS IN CONSISTENT DOSES.** Try taking the medication at the recommended dose about a day before you expect your period.
- **DEVELOP NUTRITIOUS EATING HABITS.** For example, limit your intake of alcohol, caffeine, fats, salt, and sweets, especially during the days preceding menstruation.

For More Information:

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