

Frequently Asked Questions About Menstrual Pain

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Why do women have a menstrual period?

Every month the ovaries make hormones that cause the inside lining of the uterus to thicken in preparation for pregnancy. If pregnancy does not happen, the hormone levels drop the lining of the uterus sheds as menstrual blood. This blood is pushed out by contraction of the uterus.

When does menstrual pain start?

The medical term for menstrual pain is **dysmenorrhea**. This type of pain can start from the first time you have a period, or it can start after having normal periods for a while. Period pain can happen in adolescents and teenagers and it can also happen in older women who are not yet in menopause.



Figure 1: Young woman with menstrual pain.

What can cause the period to hurt?

Although some mild cramps during menstruation are expected, severe cramping is not normal. In some women severe cramps are caused by substances known as **prostaglandins** which cause the uterus to contract. It is not known why, but in some women, prostaglandin levels are high and can cause irregular or very strong uterine contractions. These contractions can cause not only pain, but also heavy or irregular bleeding, nausea and bowel symptoms. In other women, the pain and abnormal bleeding can be caused by masses in the uterus, called fibroids, or masses on the ovaries, called cysts. Two other conditions known as **endometriosis** and **adenomyosis** can cause pain too. In these cases, cells that are like the cells that line the inside of the uterus, can grow in the muscle of the uterus (adenomyosis), or even outside the uterus (endometriosis). Then there are cases where the pain is caused by organs other than the uterus. In conditions like irritable bowel syndrome and painful bladder syndrome the pain is caused by the bladder and bowel, not the uterus. Because the bowel and bladder are in the lower belly, right next to the uterus and ovaries, the pain can be crampy and very similar to menstrual pain. Also, the pain can worsen during the time of menstruation, even though uterus and ovaries are normal. When there is no obvious cause for the pain, this is known as

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primary dysmenorrhea. **Secondary dysmenorrhea** is painful menstruation caused by an underlying condition such as endometriosis or fibroids.

What does period pain (dysmenorrhea) feel like?

Women with dysmenorrhea can have throbbing, cramping pain in the lower belly and low back. The pain can be constant, or it can happen sometimes, but it usually happens at a regular time during the month. Sometimes women may also have diarrhea, headaches, nausea, and feeling tired. The pain can vary but for some women it can be bad enough that it keeps them from being able to work, go to school or do their usual activities.

What should I do when my periods hurt?

First you can try some at home remedies such as a heating pad, exercise, yoga and breathing exercises. You can also try some over-the-counter medications such as Acetaminophen or Ibuprofen. For these medications to work, you should take them before the pain and the bleeding becomes severe. It is best to try these medications starting 1 to 2 days before your period. If these remedies don't work or you continue to have long-lasting pain that is preventing you from living your life, it is important to talk to your doctor. Keep a diary of the timing and severity of your and the treatments you have tried. Share that information with your doctor to help you choose treatment.

Is it ok to be sexually active when I have a period?

If you and your partner are comfortable, there is no problem with having intercourse while you are menstruating. However, a form of contraception and condoms are recommended because pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections can still happen during your period.

If my periods hurt, when should I seek care from a doctor?

Dysmenorrhea, or menstrual pain, affects as many as 9 out of 10 women of childbearing age, so you are not alone. Many treatments are available, so you do not have to live with this type of pain. If you cannot manage the pain on your own and it is starting to interfere with your life, you should seek help from a doctor or other healthcare provider, because left untreated, dysmenorrhea can lead to chronic pelvic pain.

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How is dysmenorrhea diagnosed?

The diagnosis is made by your clinician using your history, physical examination, and some tests. The clinician will order tests to see if your bleeding is severe enough to cause anemia. This test is called a blood count. They may also order tests to make sure you are not pregnant. Sometimes they order tests to check for infections, such as a vaginal and urine test. Another test that is important is called an ultrasound, which may be done through the belly or the vagina. The ultrasound uses sound waves to create an image of the uterus, ovaries and bladder which are the main organs in your lower belly.

How is menstrual pain treated?

Menstrual pain can be treated with several types of medications. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory (NSAIDs) pills like Ibuprofen and birth control pills are recommended first to control the bleeding and the pain. Hormone treatments in little containers that go under the skin or in the uterus, can also control pain and bleeding. Medications without hormones can be used to reduce bleeding (Tranexamic acid), or to stop menstruation completely (Gonadotropin Hormone Modulators). A surgery called endometrial ablation can stop the bleeding by cauterizing the lining of the uterus. In cases where the bleeding is due to fibroids and endometriosis, surgery can be used to remove the fibroids and endometriosis. In more severe cases, surgery can be done to remove the entire uterus (hysterectomy)

What should I know about using NSAIDS?

Non-Steroidal Anti-inflammatory medications, like ibuprofen, can help with pain. But they work better if you start taking them 1-2 days before the period starts. You should take an NSAID 2-3 times a day before menstruation. NSAIDS can have side effects like nausea, bowel problems, constipation and ulcers. So if you have a problem with your stomach or bowel, discuss how to use NSAIDs with your clinician.

Can the IUD help with menstrual pain?

There are two types of intra-uterine devices or IUD. One type has a hormone and the other does not. The IUD without hormone works well to prevent pregnancy but may worsen menstrual bleeding and pain. The IUD with hormone can reduce menstrual pain and bleeding. The important thing to know about the hormonal IUD is that it takes about 3-6 months to work. In the first 3 months of using a hormonal IUD you may experience more irregular bleeding and cramping, but after 6-12 months, 9 out of 10 women report having less pain and bleeding. The hormonal IUD also prevents pregnancy. IUDs can only be inserted and removed by a clinician.

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What alternative treatments can be used to ease period pain?

Mindfulness, meditation, acupuncture, and physical therapy can help period pain. Vitamin B1 or magnesium supplements may be helpful, but there is not enough research to say for sure that they work to help pain.