

Your guide to women's health and wellbeing

What do you know about...

Vaginal health

PMS

Period pains

Cystitis



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Your guide to women's health and wellbeing

What do you know about...PMS

Many women get premenstrual syndrome (PMS) and period pains at some point. This leaflet looks at ways to treat these conditions yourself and when to see a doctor.

Premenstrual syndrome

Q. What is PMS?

A. No one knows exactly what causes PMS – sometimes known as premenstrual tension (PMT) or 'that time of the month' – but it can affect how you feel and behave before a period in lots of ways.

The symptoms of PMS can include:

- irritability, mood swings and aggression
- increased anxiety
- poor concentration and memory
- loss of confidence
- bloatedness, breast pain and weight gain
- tiredness
- headaches or migraines
- acne.



Symptoms commonly appear anything from two weeks to just before your period, and stop a couple of days after your period starts.

You may have one or more of these symptoms. They may be quite mild or bad enough to interfere with everyday life. Different women will experience different symptoms with different intensity.

Q. What can help?

A. Before trying to treat PMS you need to know for sure that the symptoms you have are connected to your period. Some might be due to other conditions or may just be normal emotional responses.

Make a note of when you have different symptoms, using a menstrual chart for at least two months, and see if there is a pattern. This will help you identify the key symptoms to tackle.

There is no cure for PMS but you can treat individual symptoms. There are plenty of over-the-counter treatments. Some women also find taking natural alternatives and food supplements helpful.

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Talk to your local pharmacist or practice nurse about what might work best for you. Some remedies may make contraception less effective, or should not be taken with prescription medication.

Trying one treatment at a time can help identify exactly what works for you. If something works, you should see a noticeable benefit after three months.

Some tips to try:

- What you eat is crucial. Eating small meals regularly can help maintain blood sugar levels and reduce mood swings. Also:
 - Reduce
 - sugar
 - salt
 - caffeine
 - alcohol
 - Increase
 - fruit
 - vegetables
 - water
- Increase your regular exercise to reduce fluid retention and to release chemicals into your body that make you feel better. Find a form of exercise you enjoy and get into a routine so you'll still do it before and during your period.

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- Wearing loose-fitting clothing can help reduce bloating, and a more supportive bra can help reduce breast pain.
 - Reduce stress, take time out for yourself – listen to some music, have a relaxing bath or go for a walk.
 - Consider appropriate alternative therapies such as reflexology, traditional Chinese medicine, homeopathy and massage. Many women prefer to take this route rather than a traditional one.

Q. Should I see my GP?

A. See a GP if PMS is affecting your work, daily life or relationships, or if your symptoms persist. Remember to take your menstrual chart with you.

If it makes you feel more comfortable, ask to see a female GP if there is one at your practice, or go to a local sexual health and reproductive nurse or a well woman clinic.

Treatment will depend on what symptoms you have and how severe they are. There is prescription medication to help with many PMS symptoms. Your GP will want to rule out other conditions with similar symptoms.

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Painful periods

Q. What are period pains?

A. During your period, the muscles in your womb tense up and this can be painful. You may feel sharp cramps, or a dull ache, starting in your stomach and sometimes spreading to your back and thighs.

You may also have a headache or sore breasts, and feel sick, tired or bloated.

The pain usually starts when your period does, or just before, and can last from a few hours to two to three days. It can vary with each period. The pain is normally worse when bleeding is heaviest.

Period pains vary over time, but are most common when you first start having periods.



Q. What can help?

A. There are various remedies for period pains, but some may not be suitable if you're on medication. Ask your local pharmacist or practice nurse for advice. Here are some example remedies:

- A hot water bottle, warm bath or shower, and gentle massage can soothe a sore stomach or back.
- Wear loose clothes, especially if you feel bloated.
- Yoga or Pilates before and during your period relieves pain by relaxing your muscles and increasing the blood supply to your womb.
- Try aerobic exercise such as dancing or brisk walking – you probably won't feel like it but it may ease the pain.

Although the effectiveness of herbal or vitamin supplements is not certain, women often report benefits from taking these.

Where your period pains are severe and long-standing, your doctor may recommend the contraceptive pill or other form of contraception if you are not already using this.

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Q. Should I see my GP?

A. Go to your GP if:

- the pain is very severe
- the pain lasts for more than a few days
- you suddenly start getting period pains after years of pain-free periods.

Your GP will check if there is a significant problem that needs to be treated, like an infection or fibroids. The doctor can also prescribe stronger medication that you cannot buy over the counter to help with the pain.

Looking after your health can help you cope with PMS and period pains, and reduce their impact on your life. Make sure you get enough sleep and eat a diet rich in starch, fibre, fruit and vegetables. Try to cut out smoking, alcohol, sugar, salt, caffeine and fat.



Further information

Endometriosis UK
www.endo.org.uk

Fibroids UK
www.fibroids.co.uk

She Trust UK (endometriosis)
www.shetrust.org.uk

National Association for PMS
www.pms.org.uk

Menopause Matters
www.menopausematters.co.uk

NHS 24
www.nhs24.com