

DYSMENORRHEA (MENSTRUAL CRAMPS)

TO YOUR HEALTH - PATIENT EDUCATION HANDOUT

DESCRIPTION

Severe, painful cramps during menstruation. Severity of symptoms varies greatly from woman to woman, and from one time to the next in the same woman. Dysmenorrhea usually is less severe after a woman has a baby.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Cramping and sometimes sharp pains in the lower abdomen, lower back and thighs
- Nausea and vomiting (sometimes)
- Diarrhea (occasionally)
- Sweating
- Lack of energy
- Urinary frequency
- Fainting

CAUSES

Strong or prolonged contractions of the muscular wall of the uterus. These may be caused by concentration of prostaglandins (hormones manufactured by the body). Research shows that women with dysmenorrhea produce and excrete more prostaglandins than those who don't have as much discomfort. Dilation of the cervix to allow passage of blood clots from the uterus to the vagina. Other causes include pelvic infections; endometriosis, especially if dysmenorrhea begins after age 20; and benign tumors of the uterus.

RISK INCREASES WITH

- Pelvic infections
- Sexually transmitted diseases
- Endometriosis or endometritis (uterine lining disorders)
- Adenomyosis (benign growth of the uterine lining)
- Fibroids or other conditions of the uterus
- Congenital (being born with) uterine or vaginal abnormalities
- Use of an intrauterine device (IUD)
- Smoking or alcohol use
- Not having given birth
- Family history of dysmenorrhea
- Obesity
- Early onset of puberty

Student Health Center

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This information is for educational purposes only. Consult your doctor for specific medical advice, diagnosis and treatment.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

Take female hormones that prevent ovulation, such as oral contraceptives. Treatment of the underlying cause, if one exists.

EXPECTED OUTCOME

Symptoms can be controlled with treatment and improve with age and childbirth.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Severe pain that regularly interferes with normal activity
- Impaired fertility
- Ectopic pregnancy

GENERAL MEASURES

Pelvic exam and a patient history may help suggest the cause of dysmenorrhea. Initial treatment aims are to relieve pain. Long term goals of treatment involve treating any underlying cause with medication, counseling or possibly surgery. Heat helps relieve pain. Use a heating pad or hot-water bottle on the abdomen or back, or take hot baths. Sit in a tub of hot water for 10 to 15 minutes as often as necessary. Counseling and relaxation therapy may be helpful if dysmenorrhea is stress-related.

MEDICATION

- For minor discomfort, you may use nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen, naproxen or aspirin.
- Antiprostaglandins (for painful periods) and oral contraceptives, which prohibit ovulation, may be prescribed.
- You may be prescribed vitamin B or vitamin E supplements. These help relieve symptoms in some persons.
- In severe cases other hormonal treatments may be prescribed.

ACTIVITY & DIET

No restrictions. Regular exercise produces endorphins which ease pain. No special diet. You may be prescribed vitamin-B supplements. These help relieve symptoms in some persons. Avoid caffeine. Get adequate rest.

NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF...

- Bleeding becomes excessive (you saturate a pad or tampon more frequently than once each hour).
- Self-care treatments do not relieve the symptoms
- New, unexplained symptoms develop.



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Dial-A-Nurse is available after-hours until 10:30 p.m. during fall and spring semesters. In case of emergency dial 911.