

More than half of women who have menstrual periods have some pain for at least 1-2 days each month. Usually, the pain is mild. Sometimes, however, the pain is severe enough to keep them from their normal activities. When the pain is this severe, it is called **dysmenorrhea**. Dysmenorrhea is common. Painful periods are the leading cause of women missing work and school.

This pamphlet tells you about:

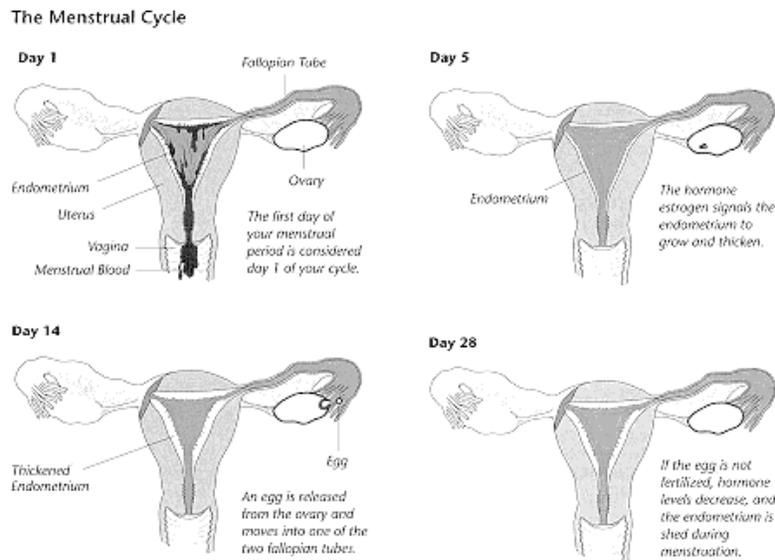
- The symptoms and causes of dysmenorrhea
- How you can help relieve the pain

PAINFUL PERIODS or DYSMENORRHEA

The Menstrual Cycle

The menstrual period begins with the first day of bleeding of one period and ends with the first day of the next period. An average menstrual cycle lasts about 28 days.

During the menstrual cycle, **estrogen** and **progesterone**—two hormones made by the ovaries—cause changes in the endometrium (the lining of the **uterus**). On about day 14 of your cycle, an egg is released from one of the ovaries. This is called ovulation. The egg moves into one of the two fallopian tubes connected to the uterus where it can be fertilized by a sperm. If the egg is not fertilized, pregnancy does not occur. The levels of hormones then drop. This signals the uterus to shed its lining. This shedding is your monthly period. It marks the start of a new cycle.



Causes of Menstrual Pains

The uterus is a muscle, and like all muscles, it contracts and relaxes. This happens throughout the menstrual cycle. During your period, the uterus contracts more strongly. These contractions are caused by **prostaglandins**—a substance made by the endometrium. Sometimes, when the uterus contracts it produces a cramping pain.

Before your period, the level of prostaglandins in your body increases. Prostaglandin is released when your period starts. As you menstruate, prostaglandin levels drop. This is why pain tends to lessen after the first few days of your period.

Types of Dysmenorrhea

There are two types of dysmenorrhea. Pain during your period can be classified as either primary or secondary dysmenorrhea.

Primary Dysmenorrhea

Primary dysmenorrhea is pelvic pain that is the result of having your period. Women with primary dysmenorrhea may have any of the following symptoms:

- Cramps or pain in the lower abdomen or lower back
- Pulling feeling in the inner thighs
- Diarrhea
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Headache
- Dizziness

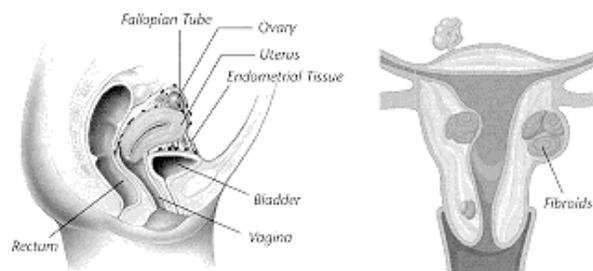
Primary dysmenorrhea often begins soon after a girl begins having menstrual periods. As a woman gets older, her periods often become less painful. The pain may lessen after a woman gives birth. Not every woman is the same, however, and some do continue to have pain during their periods. Some cycles may be more painful than others.

Secondary Dysmenorrhea

Secondary dysmenorrhea is menstrual pain that has another cause in addition to menstruation. With secondary dysmenorrhea, pain often begins earlier in the menstrual cycle. It usually lasts longer than normal cramps. For example, it may begin long before your period starts, it may get worse with your period, or it may not go away after your period ends.

Some of the most common causes of secondary dysmenorrhea are:

- *Endometriosis*—a condition in which endometrial tissue is found in other areas in the body, such as the ovaries and fallopian tubes. This tissue acts like tissue in the uterus. Endometrial tissue outside the uterus responds to monthly changes in hormones the same way it does inside the uterus. It also breaks down and bleeds. This bleeding can cause pain, especially during your period.
- *Fibroids*—tumors or growths that form on the outside, inside, or in the wall of the uterus. They are not cancerous, but they can cause more pain and heavier bleeding with periods.
- *Pelvic inflammatory disease*—an infection of the uterus, fallopian tubes, or ovaries. Most cases develop from sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).
- *Intrauterine device (IUD)*—a device placed in the uterus to prevent pregnancy. It can cause pelvic pain and cramping and may make normal menstrual cramps worse.



Painful menstrual periods may be caused by endometrial tissue that attaches to organs in the pelvis (left). Fibroids (right) also may cause heavy bleeding and pain.

Diagnosing Dysmenorrhea

Dysmenorrhea is diagnosed by exams and tests. Some of the tests may need to be done outside the doctor's office. For your doctor to diagnose a cause for dysmenorrhea, you will be asked to describe your history, symptoms, and menstrual cycles. Your doctor will then do a pelvic exam to check for anything abnormal in the reproductive organs. A **Pap test**, cultures, and blood samples may be taken. An **ultrasound** exam of the pelvic organs may also be done to further check for anything abnormal.

In some cases, the doctor can learn more by looking directly inside your body. This is usually done by laparoscopy. Laparoscopy is often done with general anesthesia. This requires admission to an outpatient surgery unit, or even to the hospital. During laparoscopy, the doctor makes a small cut near your navel. A thin lighted scope—a laparoscope—is then inserted into your abdomen. The laparoscope allows the doctor to view the pelvic organs.

Sometimes, the doctor is able to find a cause for the dysmenorrhea. But, often there is no known cause. Based on the results of the tests, you and your doctor will decide which treatment is best for you.

Medications

There are effective ways to treat menstrual pain. Your doctor can prescribe or suggest medications that can help relieve your discomfort.

NSAIDs NSAIDs (nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) are drugs that block the production of the prostaglandins that cause menstrual cramps. These drugs also can prevent the other symptoms caused by prostaglandins, such as nausea, diarrhea, and pain. You can buy most NSAIDs, such as ibuprofen or naproxen, over the counter. If these do not relieve your pain, talk to your doctor. He or she may prescribe some stronger medications.

NSAIDs work best when they are taken at the first sign of your period or pain. You usually need to take them only for 1 or 2 days. Do not take more pills than the package recommends. You should avoid taking NSAIDs while drinking alcohol. Women with bleeding disorders, liver damage, stomach disorders, or ulcers should not take NSAIDs.

Oral Contraceptives Taking oral contraceptives (birth control pills) also reduces menstrual pain. The birth control pill causes less growth of the endometrium. Less prostaglandin is produced, and there are fewer strong contractions, less flow, and less pain. Birth control pills can be used along with NSAIDs if necessary.

Finally...

Pain during the menstrual period is a common problem for women. Most of the pain is mild and can be treated with over-the-counter medications. Sometimes, however, menstrual pain is severe and requires medical treatment.

If you have severe menstrual cramps or cramps that last more than 2 or 3 days, call your doctor. He or she can examine you and help find a way to relieve the pain.

Glossary

Dysmenorrhea: Discomfort and pain during the menstrual period.

Estrogen: A female hormone produced in the ovaries that stimulates the growth of the lining of the uterus.

Pap Test: A test in which cells are taken from the cervix and vagina and examined under a microscope.

Progesterone: A female hormone that is produced in the ovaries and matures the lining of the uterus. When its level falls, menstruation occurs.

Prostaglandins: Chemicals that are made by the body that have many effects, including causing the muscle of the uterus to contract, usually causing cramps.

Ultrasound: A test in which sound waves are used to examine internal organs.

Uterus: A muscular organ located in the female pelvis that contains and nourishes the developing fetus during pregnancy.

Finding Relief

Besides medical treatment that your doctor may suggest, there are things you can do on your own to help ease the pain of your periods:

- **Exercise**—Women who exercise regularly often have less menstrual pain. Aerobic exercise, such as walking, jogging, biking, or swimming can be helpful.
- **Apply heat**—A warm bath or a heating pad or hot water bottle on your abdomen is soothing.
- **Get some sleep**—Making sure you get enough sleep before and during your period can help you cope with any discomfort.
- **Have sex**—Orgasms can relieve menstrual cramps in some women.
- **Relax**—Relaxation exercises, like meditation and yoga, can increase your ability to cope with pain.