

Menstrual Cramps

(Dysmenorrhea)

Approximately 30-50 percent of women in their childbearing years suffer from a condition called dysmenorrhea. In simple terms, this means painful menstrual cramps. In addition to the cramps, many women also experience nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, headache, fatigue, and nervousness.

The majority of women who experience menstrual cramps do not have any gynecological abnormalities. Health professionals refer to this condition as "primary" dysmenorrhea. Until recently, the cause of primary dysmenorrhea was unknown. Experimental evidence indicates that primary dysmenorrhea is related to the over-production of prostaglandins by the uterus.

Prostaglandins are a group of chemically similar substances synthesized by the inner lining of the uterus (e.g., the endometrium). One of the physiological effects of prostaglandins is powerful smooth muscle contractions. Because muscle is found in the uterus, stomach, intestines, and blood vessels, this excess muscle stimulation causes the symptoms of cramps, nausea, diarrhea, and headache in primary dysmenorrhea.

For a few women with dysmenorrhea, the cause is endometriosis, a condition in which tissue similar to the uterine lining is found outside the uterine cavity.

RELIEF OF MENSTRUAL CRAMPS

For many women, supportive measures such as massage, heat, exercise, and diet are enough to ease the symptoms of dysmenorrhea. Ordinary aspirin (two every four hours), especially if started a day or two prior to menstruation, may be helpful because of its anti-prostaglandin activity.

Medications

Some women find that none of the measures listed above bring relief. In recent years, several medications that inhibit the synthesis of prostaglandins have become available.

Prescription drugs, such as Naprosyn and Anaprox, are now sometimes used to provide relief in the treatment of dysmenorrhea. The medication is started at the beginning of menstruation or shortly before and is continued through the first, second, or third days of the period. Side effects are not common, but a small percentage of patients may be bothered by nausea and diarrhea. It is advisable to take the medication with food.

Over-the-counter medicines, such as Advil, Nuprin, Motrin, and Aleve contain anti-inflammatory agents, and are helpful for dysmenorrhea. These medicines are available without a prescription. Specific advice about dosage and other aspects of relieving dysmenorrhea are best obtained from your health care provider.

Narcotics such as codeine or diuretics (e.g., substances which eliminate excess body fluid) have been used with varying success. Narcotics do not really treat the cause of the problem and are given very rarely.

Birth control pills have been used with great success in the treatment of menstrual cramps since dysmenorrhea most often occurs in women who are ovulating regularly. Birth control pills cause the temporary suppression of ovulation. Because of the concern about potential side effects, however, there is some controversy about using birth control pills to treat dysmenorrhea when there is no need for contraception.

SCHEDULING AN APPOINTMENT

If you have further questions, care is available at the University Health Service. You can schedule an appointment with your primary care provider, or a women's health nurse practitioner.

Call 275-2662 to schedule an appointment at the University Health Service (UHS). UHS offers a full range of services. All visits to UHS are confidential.

LINKS

MayoClinic.com

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/menstrual-cramps/DS00506>

American Academy of Family Physicians

<http://www.aafp.org/afp/20050115/285.html>