



UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND UNIVERSITY HEALTH CENTER

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Dysmenorrhea (Menstrual Cramping)

Dysmenorrhea or menstrual cramping is one of the most common problems seen in women's health care. An estimated 50% of menstruating women are affected. The condition is most common between the ages of 15 and 25.

What are the Symptoms?

Dysmenorrhea usually begins 4-6 hours prior to the onset of menstruation, with pain that is described as cramping or spasmodic. Duration can be 48 to 72 hours. Many women report additional symptoms such as headache, nausea, bloating, backache, vomiting, diarrhea, dizziness, fainting, and breast tenderness.

What Causes Dysmenorrhea?

Dysmenorrhea is divided into two categories.

1. "Primary Dysmenorrhea" is the most common type and does not appear to be related to any disease or physical abnormality. It is thought to be caused by the over production of prostaglandins, substances that are found in many parts of the body including the uterus.

Prostaglandins are involved in controlling many functions in the body including intestinal activity, the change in the diameter of blood vessels and severity of uterine contractions. Researchers believe that when there is an excess of certain prostaglandins, uterine contractions are greater and thus cause severe pain and discomfort.

2. "Secondary Dysmenorrhea" occurs infrequently and is caused by a specific reproductive problem, a physical abnormality, or an IUD. These conditions can often be corrected by medication or surgery.

1. Apply a hot water bottle or heating pad to the abdomen during the first few hours of your period.
2. Get adequate rest.
3. Exercise in moderation can help decrease cramping by increasing the body's natural pain-killing mechanisms.
4. Medication.

a. Non-Steroidal Anti-inflammatory drugs are effective in preventing excessive prostaglandin levels that cause uterine cramping, as well as other dysmenorrhea symptoms. These medications are available by prescription or over-the-counter, depending on the strength. Over-the-counter products are ibuprofen (Advil, Nuprin) and Naproxen (Aleve). The recommended dosage of ibuprofen (Advil, Nuprin) is 400 mg every four to six hours as needed for cramps.

b. Birth control pills have been shown to help relieve dysmenorrhea. Since birth control pills prevent ovulation, they prevent the full development of the lining of the uterus, and thus the amount of prostaglandin present is reduced.

Important Reminders:

Do return to the clinic for advice if:

- you are not getting relief of your dysmenorrhea.
- you are having problems, other than the mild complaints previously mentioned.
- Do not take non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications or aspirin if you are allergic to them.

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