

Period pain

The technical term for period pain is dysmenorrhoea. It derives from an ancient Greek expression which literally means 'difficult monthly flow'.

Facts about period pain

If you have dysmenorrhoea you are not alone. Around 80% of women experience period pain at some stage in their lifetime. You can suffer from period pain from your early teens right up to the menopause. Most women experience some discomfort during menstruation, especially on the first day. But in 5% to 10% of women the pain is severe enough to disrupt their life. If your mother suffered period pains, you are more likely to suffer too. In 40% of women, period pain is accompanied by premenstrual symptoms, such as bloating, tender breasts, swollen stomach, lack of concentration, mood swings, clumsiness and tiredness.

There are two different types of period pain:

Primary dysmenorrhoea

This commonly occurs in teenage girls and young women, towards the beginning of menstrual life. The cramping pains are caused by the uterus contracting to shed its lining. There may also be pain caused by the decreased supply of blood to the uterus. The pain is mainly in the lower part of the abdomen but can go into the back and down the front of the thighs. Some women feel nauseated at the same time. It is a perfectly natural condition and for many women is simply a mild monthly discomfort. Primary dysmenorrhoea can be eased with the contraceptive pill as well as some relaxation techniques.

Secondary dysmenorrhoea

This may not start until your mid-twenties or later. It is unlikely to cease after childbirth. The pain is not restricted to "time of the month" bleeding and can occur throughout the cycle. Periods may become heavier and more prolonged, and intercourse may be painful. Secondary dysmenorrhoea can be a sign of other conditions, including pelvic infections, which may need urgent attention. If you start to experience period pain as an adult you should not hesitate to consult a GP.

Coping with period pain

There are a number of simple ways to ease the discomfort:

- Relax in a hot bath with aromatherapy oils
- Cuddle a hot water bottle
- Have a back and stomach massage. This is extremely effective for some women
- Wear loose fitting clothing in the couple of days prior to and during your period
- Do some gentle exercise such as yoga. A regular relaxation programme before the period is due and on the first few days helps to relax the muscles and improves blood supply to the pelvic area
- For fast relief, take a painkiller specifically designed for period symptoms.

.....
This fact sheet has been prepared by Women's Health Concern and reviewed by the medical advisory council of the British Menopause Society. It is for your information and advice and should be used in consultation with your own medical practitioner.

Lifestyle changes

Research has shown that period pain symptoms can be eased by modifying lifestyle. So try the following:

- First and foremost, stop or cut down smoking. Smoking is thought to increase the incidence of period pain by reducing the supply of oxygen to the pelvic area
- Reduce your alcohol consumption
- Eat high fibre foods and plenty of salads and vegetables
- Daily vitamin E supplements have been shown to help some women
- If you eat red meat make sure it is lean. Eat more chicken and fish
- Cut down on sugary foods, chocolate, cakes and biscuits
- Reduce the amount of salt in your diet to avoid water retention
- Choose pure fruit juices or mineral water rather than sugary drinks
- Take a supplement containing gamma linolenic acid (GLA) such as evening primrose oil or starflower oil or vitamin B6. Both help maintain hormonal balance.

If pain persists visit your GP for a check up. You might be prescribed:

- Non-hormonal drug treatments: Tranexamic acid and/or Mefenamic acid
- The contraceptive pill: not only will this reduce some of the pain and discomfort, but will make your periods lighter and more regular
- Stronger pain killers that you can't buy from a chemist: these should be started as soon as the period starts—don't wait until the pain is at its worst to take them
- The intra-uterine system (IUS) may be suitable for some women: this is a very effective method of contraception which may also reduce blood loss and period pains.

Useful resources

<https://www.acog.org/Patients/FAQs/Dysmenorrhea-Painful-Periods>
<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/period-pain/>

.....

Author: Dr Pratima Gupta in collaboration with the medical advisory council of the British Menopause Society

PUBLICATION DATE: NOVEMBER 2022
REVIEW DATE: NOVEMBER 2025



Women's Health Concern is the patient arm of the BMS.
We provide an independent service to advise, reassure and educate women of all ages about their health, wellbeing and lifestyle concerns.

Go to www.womens-health-concern.org

