

# Premenstrual Syndrome

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## What is it?

Premenstrual syndrome (PMS) is a physical and emotional disorder that starts 5 to 10 days before a woman's monthly period (*menstruation*). The symptoms usually stop soon after the period begins. While going through menopause a woman may have symptoms during and after the period as well. Even women who have had a hysterectomy can have PMS if their ovaries are still working.

Most women feel some discomfort before their period. But if you have PMS, you may feel so anxious, depressed or uncomfortable that you can't cope at home or at work. Your symptoms may be worse some months and better others.

PMS happens regularly each month. If you have symptoms similar to those of PMS, but the symptoms last all month or do not recur regularly, you probably do not have PMS.

## What causes it?

No one knows for sure. But PMS seems to be linked to changes in hormone levels during the menstrual cycle. PMS is not caused by stress or psychological problems, though these may make the symptoms of PMS worse.

## Who gets it?

Each individual woman experiences PMS in a unique way. Most menstruating women experience some body changes with each menstrual cycle. For 20% to 60% of women, these changes impact their lives in significant ways and for 5% of women, symptoms can be severely disabling. The severe form of PMS is called *premenstrual dysphoric disorder* (PMDD). Some studies show that PMS is more common in women in their thirties and forties than in younger women. PMS usually goes away by itself before menopause and during pregnancy.

## What are the symptoms?

There are many different PMS symptoms, affecting many parts of the body. Symptoms may be mild,

moderate or severe enough to interfere with work or home life. Those women who have severe symptoms should seek help urgently. In the case of more mild to moderate symptoms, your health care provider may ask you to keep track of your symptoms on a calendar to see if they follow a monthly pattern.

While over 150 symptoms have been documented, those listed below are the most common.

### Physical Symptoms

- Acne
- Abdominal bloating
- Constipation
- Food craving (sugar, salt or chocolate)
- Dizziness
- Fatigue
- Headache
- Joint pain
- Breast tenderness
- Loss of libido (sexual desire)
- Trouble concentrating
- Insomnia
- Hives
- Fluid retention
- Weight gain

### Emotional Symptoms

- Irritability
- Depression
- Confusion
- Anxiety
- Hostility
- Mood Swings
- Tearfulness
- Tension
- Suicidal thoughts

## Can it be treated?

Although there is no known way to entirely prevent the symptoms of PMS during the reproductive years (except of course for surgical removal of the ovaries), there are ways to control PMS. You should know what your PMS symptoms are and when they happen. Then

you can change your daily routine to get through each month as smoothly as possible. While the things recommended below aren't guaranteed to work for you, they have worked for many women.

Try not to get discouraged if following these tips or taking medicine doesn't work for you. Treatment varies from one person to another. Your doctor can help you find the best treatment.

- **Reduce stress** and learn to recognize and avoid activities or encounters that increase stress for you. Emotional stress often affects your hormonal system, causing physical stress. Physical stress can cause or increase PMS symptoms. There are several aspects of stress management which include physically relaxing your body, managing your time so you don't feel overbooked, coping with difficult emotions, and affirming your good health.

Relaxation using breathing techniques can be done without anyone noticing while you are on the phone, in the car or waiting in line. Slowly inhale through your nose, hold for a count of five, and then slowly exhale through your mouth. Relaxation using muscle tension and release exercises needs to be done with each part of your body, one part at a time. Tighten and tense the body part, hold for a count of five, and then relax. Move through your body from toes to head.

Managing your time can be important to reduce stress. Try to set aside at least thirty minutes per day to either practice relaxation, take a walk, listen to music, or in some other way let go of the fast pace. Often women need more time to be alone near their periods and it's helpful if you can learn to communicate honestly your feelings to your friends and family.

Coping with difficult emotions is also important. Knowing how to relax your body as you cope with anger, frustration, sadness, or emotional pain can be done using the relaxation techniques described, as well as yoga and massage. You may need to postpone major decisions until your symptoms have resolved. Remember that PMS is not a disease, nor does it mean that you are "crazy".

- **Exercise** can help you with PMS in many ways. It can release nervous tension and anxiety, lift depression, ease head and back aches, lessen cramps, help prevent or stop constipation, manage your weight, and allow you time alone. It can also increase your level of *endorphin*, a natural mood lifter and pain killer.

Work up to five, 30 minute periods per week. Consider taking a long brisk walk and bike ride, swimming, skiing, or anything you enjoy. Simple things like raking leaves or mowing the lawn, participating in low impact aerobics, and taking the stairs instead of the elevator can help decrease stress.

- **Nutrition** has been shown to be linked with the symptoms of PMS. Caffeine, sugar, fat, chocolate and salt can all worsen PMS. On the other hand, eating small, frequent meals will help with PMS. Concentrate on whole grains, fruits and vegetables, pastas and

cereals. Drinking two to three quarts of water daily will actually help the fluid retention that many women experience. Keeping to a regular schedule of meals also can be helpful. Alcohol should be avoided since it can make you feel more depressed.

Vitamin supplements have resulted in some improvement for some women, although it's best to get the vitamins you need from your diet. Adequate B-complex can ease irritability and mood swings, especially Vitamin B-6, which can be taken 50-100 mg daily for ten days before menses. Vitamin C can help with allergies and inflamed nasal membranes and should be taken in doses of 250-1000 mg daily. Vitamin E should be taken no more than 400 IU per day and Vitamin D no more than 100 IU per day.

Calcium may reduce symptoms of water retention, cramps and back pain. Taking 1000mg of calcium per day is recommended for women 18-50, especially because calcium has so many other benefits, such as being good for your bones.

A multi-vitamin may be the easiest way to make sure you get the vitamins and minerals you need without side effects or toxic doses. A multi-vitamin should include calcium, magnesium, zinc, as well as Vitamins A, B-complex, C, D and E.

- **Medication** may be prescribed for you, depending upon what your symptoms are. You may need to try more than one medicine to find the treatment that works for you.

*Anti-inflammatories* inhibit the formation of *prostaglandins*, which are chemical substances that make your uterus contract more strongly during your periods. Anti-inflammatories can also help ease the headache and general aches and pains (such as cramps) that some women have with PMS. Examples include ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin, Nuprin) and naproxen (Aleve), as well as aspirin. There are also many prescription anti-inflammatories that can be used. They're usually taken right before and during the beginning of your period.

*Diuretics* can occasionally be used to help your body get rid of extra fluid. They can ease bloating, weight gain, breast pain and abdominal pain.

*Antidepressants* are also sometimes used to help with severe irritability, depression, and anxiety that some women have with PMS.

#### In summary

- Premenstrual syndrome is characterized by symptoms which happen regularly each month.
- PMS symptoms are both physical and emotional.
- For more information contact your doctor or the American Academy of Family Physicians at [familydoctor.org](http://familydoctor.org)