



What are menstrual cramps?

Menstrual cramps are abdominal and pelvic area (belly) pains that are experienced by a woman around the time of her menstrual period. Menstrual cramps are not the same as the discomfort felt during premenstrual syndrome (PMS) although the symptoms of both disorders can sometimes be experienced as a continual process. Many women suffer from both PMS and menstrual cramps.

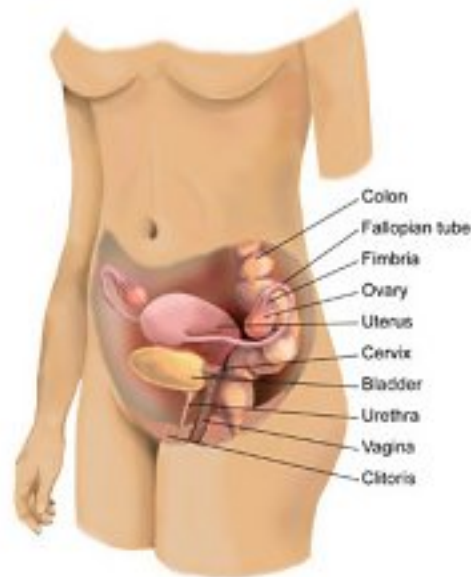
Menstrual cramps can range from mild to quite severe. Mild menstrual cramps may be barely noticeable and of short duration - sometimes felt just as a sense of light heaviness in the belly. Severe menstrual cramps can be so painful that they interfere with a woman's regular activities for several days.

How common are menstrual cramps?

Menstrual cramps of some degree affect more than an estimated 50% of women, and among these, up to 15% would describe their menstrual cramps as severe.

What causes menstrual cramps?

The Female Reproductive System



Each month, the inner lining of the uterus (the endometrium) builds up in preparation for a possible pregnancy. If the egg is not fertilized by a sperm, the current lining of the uterus is no longer needed. The woman's estrogen and progesterone hormone levels decline and the lining of the uterus becomes

swollen and dies. It is then shed and will be replaced by a new lining in the next monthly cycle.

When the old uterine lining begins to break down, molecular compounds called prostaglandins are released. These compounds, specifically prostaglandin F2alpha (PGF2alpha), cause the muscles of the uterus to contract. When the uterine muscles contract, they constrict the blood supply (vasoconstriction) to the endometrium. This contraction blocks the delivery of oxygen to the tissue of the endometrium which, in turn, breaks down and dies. After the death of this tissue, the uterine contractions literally squeeze the old endometrial tissue through the cervix and out of the body by way of the vagina.

Why are some cramps so painful?

Menstrual cramps are caused by uterine contractions. The cramping sensation is intensified when clots or pieces of bloody tissue from the lining of the uterus pass through the cervix, especially if a woman's cervical canal is narrow.

The difference between menstrual cramps that are more painful and those that are less painful is apparently related to a woman's prostaglandin levels. Women with menstrual cramps have prostaglandin blood levels that are 5-13 times higher than women who do not experience cramps. Menstrual cramps are very similar to those a pregnant woman experiences when she is given prostaglandin as a medication to induce labor.

A word about secondary dysmenorrhea

Sometimes menstrual cramps may be caused by other factors; these belong to a group called secondary dysmenorrhoea. Some causes include:

- Growth of uterine tissue outside the uterus, called endometriosis;
- Non-cancerous growths of muscle and fibrous tissue in the uterus, called fibroid tumors;
- Non-cancerous growth of the uterine lining in the muscular wall of the uterus, called adenomyosis;
- Inflammation of the fallopian tubes;
- Growth of scar tissue, or adhesions, between organs
- -etc-

How to manage common menstrual cramps?

Every woman needs to find a treatment that works for her.

Perhaps the most common treatment, especially in the past, has been to lie down at the first sign of pain. It used to be that many women's restrooms contained a cot or a couch so that a woman who felt "indisposed" could lie down. A bed in the school nurse's office served the same purpose and girls were routinely excused from physical education or other classes because of menstrual cramps.

Current recommendations include not only adequate rest and sleep, but also regular exercise (especially walking).

Some women find that the following may be useful:

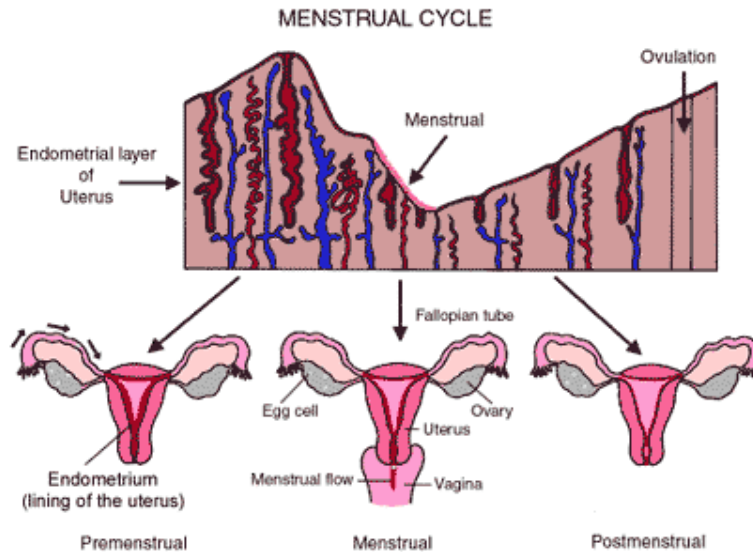
- Abdominal massage
- Yoga
- Orgasmic sexual activity help
- Heating pad applied to the abdominal area to relieve pain and congestion.

A number of medicines can help control the pain as well as actually prevent the menstrual cramps themselves. For mild cramps, aspirin or acetaminophen (Tylenol), or acetaminophen may be sufficient. However, aspirin has limited effect in curbing the production of prostaglandin and is only useful for less painful cramps.

The main agents for treating moderate menstrual cramps are the nonsteroidal antiinflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), which lower the production of prostaglandin and lessen its effect. These include:

- Ibuprofen
- Naproxen
- Ketoprofen
- Mefenamic acid

A woman should start taking one of these medications before her pain becomes difficult to control. This might mean starting medication 1-2 days before her period is due to begin and continuing taking medication 1-2 days into her period. The best results are obtained by taking one of the NSAIDs on a scheduled basis and not waiting for the pain to begin.



What if the cramps are very severe?

If a woman's menstrual cramps are too severe to be managed by these strategies, her doctor might prescribe low dose oral contraceptives containing estrogen and progesterin or long-acting edroxyprogesterone. This type of approach can prevent ovulation (the monthly release of an egg) and reduce the production of prostaglandins which, in turn, reduces the severity of cramping and causes a light menstrual flow

Please see your physician as soon as possible if your symptoms continue to persist despite the above measures.

Appointments

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Adapted from medicinenet.com