

# Menstrual Cramps

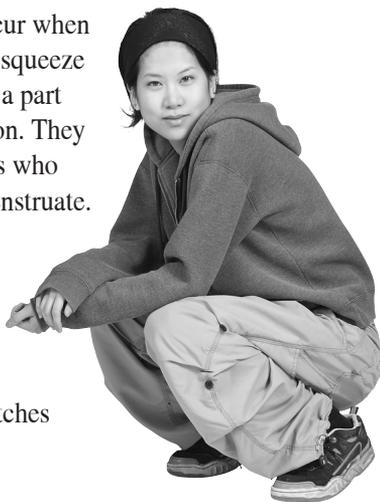
Menstrual cramps are also called painful periods. Most females have them at sometime during their lives.

## Signs and Symptoms

- Pain or discomfort in the lower abdomen right before or with a menstrual period. The pain can range from mild to severe.
- The pain can occur with: A backache; fatigue; headache; diarrhea and/or vomiting.
- Symptoms can vary from month to month or year to year.

## Causes

Menstrual cramps occur when muscles of the uterus squeeze the lining out. This is a part of normal menstruation. They occur often in females who have just begun to menstruate. They may go away or become less severe after a woman reaches her mid-twenties or gives birth. (Childbirth stretches the uterus.)



Menstrual cramps occur much less often in women who do not ovulate. In fact, birth control pills reduce painful periods in 70 percent to 80 percent of females who take them. When the birth control pill is stopped, the same level of pain returns.

Menstrual cramps can be due to other problems. Examples are fibroids, endometriosis, ovarian cysts, and rarely, cancer. Having an intrauterine device (IUD), especially if you've never been pregnant, can also cause menstrual cramps, except with the Progestasert® IUD. It releases a small amount of progesterone into the uterus. This lessens cramps and lightens menstrual flow.

## Treatment

Self-care measures treat most cases of menstrual cramps. If not, a doctor can diagnose the cause and prescribe treatment.

## Questions to Ask

Do you have any signs of infection, such as fever and foul-smelling vaginal discharge or do you have black stools or blood in the stools?

YES



NO

Have your periods been very painful since having an intrauterine device (IUD) inserted?

YES



NO

Is the pain extreme or have you had pain-free periods for years, but are now having severe cramps?

YES



NO

*Flowchart continued on next page*

## Menstrual Cramps, continued

### Flowchart continued

Does cramping continue even after your period is over?

YES



NO

Do any of these things apply?

- Bleeding with a period is a lot heavier than normal.
- You could be newly pregnant (your period is late by one week or longer) and you have pain that feels like menstrual cramps.

YES



NO



### Self-Care

#### To Relieve Menstrual Cramps

- Take an over-the-counter pain reliever, such as ibuprofen, naproxen sodium, or aspirin. These nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) relieve pain and inhibit the release of prostaglandins. Acetaminophen will help with pain, too. Most over-the-counter menstrual discomfort products contain acetaminophen. Read labels. **{Note:}** Do not give aspirin or any medication with salicylates to anyone 19 years of age or younger due to its link with Reye's Syndrome.}
- Hold a heating pad or hot-water bottle on your abdomen or lower back.



*Drink a cup of regular, chamomile, or mint tea.*

- Take a warm bath.
- Gently massage your abdomen.
- Do mild exercises. Stretch. Do yoga. Walk. Bicycle.
- When you can, lie on your back. Support your knees with a pillow.
- Get plenty of rest. Limit stress as your period nears.
- Consider using birth control pills or the Progestasert® IUD. These lessen menstrual cramps.



*Exercise may improve blood flow and reduce pelvic pain.*

If you still feel pain after using self-care measures, call your doctor.

#### For Information, Contact:

National Women's Health Information Center  
[www.womenshealth.gov](http://www.womenshealth.gov)