

# Painful Periods

---

## What is Menstrual Pain?

Pain during your monthly menstrual flow (also called dysmenorrhea) is very common and can affect any women from puberty to menopause. Menstrual pain is most common during the first few years of periods. Fifteen percent to twenty percent of all women are unable to function because of period pain, almost all have had occasional discomfort. For most women, the cause of menstrual pain is cramping by the uterine muscle as it expels menstrual fluid. Sometimes other processes such as fibroids (common non-cancerous growths on the uterus) or endometriosis can contribute to or cause painful menstrual flow.

## How is Menstrual Pain Diagnosed?

Menstrual pain is diagnosed based on your symptoms and your doctor's findings during a pelvic examination. It is seldom necessary to carry out any other tests, though occasionally viewing your internal organs by ultrasonography can be helpful.

## Signs and Symptoms

The most common symptom experienced by women with period pain is lower abdominal cramping, that may be accompanied by low back pain or leg pain. For some, nausea, vomiting or diarrhea may also occur. Bloating, breast pain, fatigue and moodiness are common before or during menstruation but are considered part of 'PMS' and not menstrual pain.

## How is Menstrual Pain Managed?

For many women, medications such as ibuprofen (Motrin), naproxen (Aleve) and others will provide excellent relief. If you would also like birth control, hormonal contraceptives such as 'the pill' or intrauterine device ("IUD") can also reduce menstrual pain and flow. A heating pad or air-activated heat patch (ThermaCare) can be as effective as medications for many women. When these are not enough, your doctor may prescribe stronger medications or other pain relievers. When special causes for your pain can be identified, specific therapies for that cause will be more appropriate and effective than general measures.

## Dos and Don'ts

- Do remain active, eating and drinking normally, if at all possible – some studies suggest that physical activity can even help with the pain.
- Do be careful to avoid excessive heat or burns from a heating pad – an air-activated heat patch (ThermaCare) is safer and more portable.
- Don't use someone else's medications or birth control pills.
- Don't suffer alone – for almost all patients effective help is available from your doctor.