



Painful Periods (Dysmenorrhea)

Why do I have cramps?

Menstrual cramps are caused by the contractions of the muscles of your uterus during your period. Your uterus makes prostaglandins that make your uterus contract.

Is it ok to have pain with my period?

Most people have some pain with their period, commonly called “menstrual cramps”. Healthcare providers call this dysmenorrhea. Pain can happen before your period starts or with bleeding. Some teens have nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea during their periods as well. While these symptoms are common, your healthcare provider can recommend treatment which may help.

What can I do if I have pain with my period?

Talk to your healthcare provider about medication which may help with painful periods. Medications that are sold “over-the-counter” without a prescription, called NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs), block the effect of prostaglandins and decrease menstrual cramps. Ibuprofen and naproxen (found as the active ingredient in medications such as Advil®, Motrin®, Aleve®, Anaprox® and Motrin®) are NSAID medications and can be very effective in stopping menstrual cramps.

You should talk to your healthcare provider about how much and how often to take these medicines. You can also use a heating pad on your abdomen to help with cramping. Regular exercise has also been shown to help. If you use these medicines and still have pain, you should talk to your provider about other treatment options. Sometimes hormones are prescribed to further improve the pain. When menstrual cramps do not improve with NSAIDs or hormones, other causes of the pain will need to be investigated.

When should I take medicine for cramps?

It is important to take your NSAID medicine *before* your cramps are severe. Once the cramps start, the prostaglandins start to build up and then the medicine doesn’t work as well. You should take this medicine regularly during the time you have cramps and not just once in a while. You can even take the medicine just before your period and cramps are supposed to start. You can talk to your healthcare provider to make sure you are taking the right dose of medication. You should always take NSAIDs with food as they can irritate your stomach.

What will my healthcare provider do if my periods are very painful?

First, your provider will want to know more about your periods—how often they come, when your pain started and how much pain you are having. Then they will want to know which medicines you have tried and when you are taking these medicines. They may be able to change the way you are using your NSAIDs to make them more effective.

If NSAIDs have not been working for you, your healthcare provider will want to discuss using hormones to help stop your cramping. These hormones are found in medications and devices that are often used for birth control (pills, vaginal rings, patches, injections, and some kinds of IUDs) but they have other important medical uses as well. These are very safe and effective ways to treat menstrual cramps. Many teens use them to treat their cramps even though they have no need for birth control. If the painful periods continue, your healthcare provider may want to talk with you about other possible causes, such as endometriosis.