Menstrual Cramps and Dysmenorrhea

What causes menstrual cramps?

- When most girls begin their menstrual cycles, muscle cramps in the uterus are caused by contractions that lead to discomfort and pain. The body produces a chemical called prostaglandin that causes this contraction and then causes pain.
- There are other reasons for pain, which need to be taken care of by a doctor. It is important to talk to your doctor if you experience pain when you are not having your menstrual period and if your pain continues once your menstrual period stops.

Is it normal to have pain with your menstrual periods?

- Cramping pain with your menstrual periods may occur. Mild pain for a short amount of time generally is thought to be normal. For mild pain or cramps, your doctor may suggest a heating pad or hot shower.
- The pain may occur just before your menstrual period starts, and it may last for the first few days of your period.
- Some girls notice more pain and cramps when their menstrual periods are heavier.
- If your cramps stop you from doing your daily activities or you are absent from school one or more days each month because of the cramps, you should talk to your health care provider.

What is dysmenorrhea?

- Dysmenorrhea is another word for severe pain during your menstrual period.
- It happens usually before or during your menstrual period or at both times.

What is the treatment for dysmenorrhea?

- Your health care provider first will ask you questions about your menstrual periods, when you have pain, and if you have any other medical problems.
- You may need to have a pelvic examination, but this may not always be necessary. If you are sexually active, a pregnancy test may be performed in addition to screening for infections.
- Pelvic ultrasonography creates pictures of the internal organs of the body from sound waves and is used to help find possible problems. It may be suggested by your health care provider.
- For severe pain, your doctor may suggest using over-the-counter medications, such as ibuprofen or naproxen. These block prostaglandins and are more effective than acetaminophen in relieving menstrual cramps.
- If pain does not get better with usual methods, your doctor may suggest a birth control pill, patch, ring, or injection to reduce the pain.

For More Information

We have provided information on the following organizations and web sites because they have information that may be of interest to our readers. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) does not necessarily endorse the views expressed or the facts presented by these organizations or on these web sites. Further, ACOG does not endorse any commercial products that may be advertised or available from these organizations or on these web sites.

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
Telephone: (202) 638-5577 or (800) 673-8444
Web: www.acog.org

AWARE Foundation
Telephone: (215) 955-9847
Web: www.awarefoundation.org

Center for Young Women's Health
Telephone: (617) 355-2994
Web: www.youngwomenshealth.org

girlshealth.gov
Web: www.4girls.gov

Go Ask Alice
Telephone (212) 854-5453
Web: www.goaskalice.columbia.edu

The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada
Telephone: (800) 561-2416 or (613) 730-4192
Web: http://sogc.medical.org/index_e.asp
www.sexualityandu.ca/home_e.aspx

TeensHealth
Nemours Foundation
Telephone: (904) 232-4100
Coping with common period problems:
Web: www.teenhealth.org/teen/sexual_health/girls/menstrual_problems.html

Prepared by the ACOG Committee on Adolescent Health Care. For more information, e-mail adolhlth@acog.org.
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