

## Patient leaflets from the BMJ Group

# Painful periods

**Painful periods can make you feel miserable and stop you enjoying life. But there are many treatments that can help you feel better, including things you can do besides taking medicines.**

We've looked at the best and most up-to-date research to produce this information. You can use it to talk to your doctor or pharmacist and decide which treatments are right for you.

### What causes painful periods?

Many women get pain in their lower abdomen (pelvis), and sometimes in their back or legs, during or just before their period.

The pain is usually due to the period itself, not another medical problem. Researchers think the pain is caused by the body making a lot of chemicals called prostaglandins. These chemicals help the womb to squeeze (contract) and push out its lining during a period.

Some women get period pain because of another medical condition. For example, you might have endometriosis (when bits of womb lining grow in your lower abdomen), an infection, or cysts (lumps) on your ovaries. You're more likely to get period pain from a medical condition as you get older.

### What are the symptoms?

The most common symptom is sharp spasms (cramps), usually in the middle of the lower abdomen (pelvis). You may also get pain in your lower back and down the backs of your legs. Some women feel sick and may vomit. Others get headaches and feel light-headed.

For most women, period pain comes on when their bleeding starts, and is worst during the heaviest days of their period.

You should talk to your doctor if you get any of the following:

- Pain at other times (not just in the first few days of your period)
- Pain during sex
- Pain that is not helped by drugs
- A discharge from your vagina that is different from normal.

There could be another reason for your pain and your doctor will want to find out the cause.

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### What treatments work?

**Painkillers** can help with painful periods. Ones called **nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs** (NSAIDs) seem to work best for period pain. Ibuprofen is an NSAID that you can buy from a pharmacy. But for other ones (such as mefenamic acid and naproxen), you'll need a prescription from your doctor.

Some NSAIDs can cause side effects such as headache and stomach upset. People who take NSAIDs for a long time (usually for conditions such as arthritis) are also at risk of getting stomach ulcers and bleeding. Some NSAIDs have been linked to a higher risk of having a heart attack or a stroke. But this is for very high doses of these drugs taken over a long period.

Other painkillers you can try for painful periods include **paracetamol** and **aspirin**. These might not work as well as NSAIDs, and aspirin can cause an upset stomach. If you take paracetamol, you need to be careful to take the recommended dose, as too much can damage your liver.

If you want to avoid using painkillers, taking supplements of **vitamin B-1** (also called thiamine) or **vitamin E** has been shown to help some women with painful periods. Chinese herbal medicines might also help.

Many women take **contraceptive pills** to prevent period pain. But there's not much research on whether they work.

If you also need long-term contraception, your doctor may suggest using a type of **IUD** (intra-uterine device) that contains a hormone called levonorgestrel (the brand name is Mirena). This might help your period pain.

### Things you can do for yourself

Some women find **applying heat** to their abdomen works as well as taking ibuprofen and better than paracetamol. And if you combine heat and ibuprofen, your pain might go away faster. You can try a hot water bottle or a warm bath. You can also use self-heating patches, or packs you heat in the microwave. You can buy these in pharmacies or on the Internet.

The heat may make your skin red, but this will go away after a few days.

### Other treatments

Some women use a **transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS)** machine to help with pain during childbirth. This treatment might also help with period pain, although it doesn't seem to work as well as painkillers. You tape the small machine to your back and it gives out a small electrical current. This changes the pain signals going to your brain.

You can buy a TENS machine or get one from your doctor or other health professional.

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Some women get side effects, including muscle vibrations, pain, muscle tightness, headaches and slight burning.

If your period pain is bad and other treatments haven't helped, doctors can prescribe **hormone treatments** that stop periods altogether. But this is not common.

Researchers have looked at many other treatments for period pain. These include **acupuncture, vitamin B-12 supplements, magnesium supplements, fish oils, magnets, relaxation and exercise**. But doctors aren't sure whether they help because there hasn't been much research.

### What will happen to me?

If you get painful periods when you're young, your periods may get better as you get older. Many women find their periods are less painful after they have had a baby.

We don't know much about what happens to women who get painful periods later in life. But if your doctor finds out what's causing the pain, he or she may be able to find a treatment that helps.

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