



KAISER PERMANENTE
**PREVENTION
& SELF-CARE**

Menstrual Cramps & Missed or Irregular Periods

Self-Care Tips



For more information, look up the = **topics in bold** in the index of your *Healthwise Handbook*.

Menstrual Cramps

Many women suffer from painful menstrual cramps (dysmenorrhea). Symptoms include mild to severe cramping in the lower abdomen, back, or thighs, headaches, diarrhea, constipation, nausea, dizziness, and fainting.

During the menstrual cycle, the lining of the uterus produces a hormone called prostaglandin. This hormone causes the uterus to contract, often painfully. Women with severe cramps may produce higher than normal amounts of prostaglandin, or may be more sensitive to its effects.

Home Treatment

- **Exercise** (📖). Regular workouts decrease the severity of cramps.
- Ibuprofen and naproxen (Aleve) inhibit the production of prostaglandins, and generally help ease cramps better than aspirin or acetaminophen. Take it the day before your period starts, or at the first sign of pain. Take ibuprofen or naproxen with milk or food, as they can upset your stomach.
- Use heat (hot water bottles, heating pads, or hot baths) to relax tense muscles and relieve cramping.
- Herbal teas, such as chamomile, mint, raspberry, and blackberry are good for soothing tense muscles and anxious moods.

- Try using sanitary napkins instead of tampons.
- If you have symptoms other than cramping, such as weight gain, headache, and tension. (📖 “Premenstrual Syndrome”)

When to Call Kaiser Permanente

- If sudden, severe pelvic pain occurs with or without menstrual bleeding.
- If menstrual bleeding is very heavy (changing more than one maxi pad or super tampon an hour for more than six hours) or lasts longer than 10 days.
- If periods come closer than 21 days apart.
- If you suspect that your intra-uterine device (IUD) is causing the cramping.
- If cramps fail to respond to home treatment.
- If your period is accompanied by sudden high fever, diarrhea, or skin rash.
- If painful cramping is significantly worse than typical.
- If cramps begin five to seven days before your period begins, or if cramps do not cease when menstrual flow stops.
- If pelvic pain seems unrelated to your menstrual cycle.


Please turn over

Missed or Irregular Periods




Missed or irregular periods have a variety of causes. Pregnancy is usually the first cause to be considered, but others include:

- Stress, weight loss or gain, increased exercise (missed periods are common in endurance athletes), and travel.
- Use of birth control pills, which may cause lighter, less frequent, or skipped periods.
- Menopause or menarche (starting of menstrual periods). For the first few years of menstruation, periods may be irregular.
- Hormone imbalance or problems in the reproductive system.
- Medications, including steroids, tranquilizers, and diet pills.

Prevention

- Avoid fad diets that greatly restrict calories and food variety. Avoid rapid weight loss.
- Learn and practice relaxation exercises to cope with stress. ( "Relaxation")
- Increase exercise gradually.

Home Treatment

- If you had sex during the previous month, do a **home pregnancy test** (.
- Work on ways to reduce and cope with **stress** (.
- If you are an endurance athlete, cut back on training or talk with a doctor about estrogen/progesterone/calcium supplements to protect against bone loss.
- If dieting, include more variety and calories in your diet.
- If age 45 or older, you may be starting **menopause** (.
- Try to relax. Restoring your life to emotional and physical balance will help. Many women miss periods now and then. Chances are, unless you are pregnant, your cycle will return to normal next month.

When to Call Kaiser Permanente

- If pregnancy is possible, see a health care professional to confirm your home pregnancy test and begin pregnancy counseling and/or prenatal care.
- If you have missed two regular periods, are not pregnant, are not approaching menopause, and are not dieting, exercising a lot, or under psychological stress.
- If you are an endurance athlete who is unable to cut back on training. You may need hormones or calcium supplements.
- If you miss two or three periods while taking birth control pills, and you have not skipped any pills.



KAISER PERMANENTE®

For complete information on this and hundreds of other health topics, see your **Healthwise Handbook**.

Reprinted from the *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise® Handbook*, Revised ed. © 1999 Healthwise, Incorporated, P.O. Box 1989, Boise, Idaho, 83701.