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What is premenstrual syndrome (PMS)?

Premenstrual symptoms are a natural part of the menstrual cycle, affecting over 85 percent of women and girls at some time during their lives. Most women have tender breasts, bloating, muscle aches, and mood changes a few days before they start their menstrual periods. These are normal premenstrual symptoms. But when these symptoms negatively affect your daily life, and even the way you act, they are called premenstrual syndrome (PMS). If PMS is disrupting your normal work or school schedule, or affecting your relationships, you may want to take extra steps to relieve your symptoms.

What are typical premenstrual symptoms?

The signs and symptoms of PMS are uncomfortable. They are an unwelcome part of the monthly cycle for many women and girls. They usually occur in the two weeks before the start of the menstrual period. The most common physical and emotional signs of PMS include:

- abdominal bloating
- breast tenderness
- tension or anxiety
- depressed mood
- crying spells
- mood swings
- irritability or anger
- appetite changes and food cravings
- trouble falling asleep (insomnia) or trouble staying asleep
- joint pain or muscle pain
- headache
- fatigue

Most women with PMS have only a few symptoms, which go away as soon as their menstrual period starts. But about 30 to 40 percent of women experience the physical pain and emotional stress of PMS severely enough to affect their daily routines and activities, causing them to miss work or school.

What causes PMS?

PMS is tied to hormone changes that happen during your menstrual cycle. Doctors don't fully know why premenstrual symptoms are worse in some women than in others. They do know that, for many women, PMS runs in the family.

What can you do if you have PMS?

You cannot prevent PMS. But you can help to reduce your risk and relieve premenstrual symptoms:

- **Get regular physical activity.** Physical activity increases natural brain chemicals (endorphins) that reduce pain and provide a feeling of well-being.
- **Eat a healthy diet.** Choose a variety of foods to help keep your blood sugar levels stable. Eat small meals with complex carbohydrates (like pasta, potatoes, and high-fiber cereals), whole grains, protein, fruits, and vegetables. Avoid refined sugar, as well as too much fat, salt, alcohol, and caffeine.
- **Learn to reduce stress** with relaxation techniques, enough rest, and good time management.
- **Quit smoking**, if you smoke.

- **Keep a menstrual diary.** By writing down your symptoms, you can help identify patterns in your cycle. You can track the days when you have your period and ovulate, as well as record when symptoms change. This information will help you plan the best treatment with your health professional. Your menstrual diary can also help you better cope with your symptoms. Our Web site at kp.org has a menstrual diary that you can download for free.
- **Plan**, whenever possible, to take extra good care of your body, mind, and emotions during your premenstrual days. Good self-care can help prevent or reduce your symptoms. Try telling people close to you when your most difficult days will be so that you can get the support you need.
- **Take daily calcium (1200 mg) and vitamin D (800 IUs) supplements.** Calcium can help relieve PMS symptoms. It can help prevent water retention, mood swings, and cramps. Your body can't absorb all 1200 mg of calcium at one time, so it's best to take a 500 mg calcium pill at breakfast, lunch and dinner. Vitamin D can help your body absorb calcium and provides many other benefits.
- **Try other herbs and vitamins.** These supplements have been used successfully by many women. For example, Vitamin B6 (50 mg to 100 mg) may help reduce sugar cravings, irritability, and bloating. Magnesium may help regulate hormones and relaxes muscles.

Black cohosh may reduce the psychological symptoms of PMS. Ginkgo biloba can reduce bloating, breast tenderness, and irritability. St. John's wort can help lift moods. Chastetree may reduce irritability, anger, headache, bloating, and breast tenderness. To learn more about these herbal and vitamin supplements, visit the "Complementary and Alternative Medicine" section of our Web site at kp.org/cam.

- **Manage abdominal pain.** If you have cramps, ibuprofen (*Motrin* or *Advil*) or naprosyn (*Alieve*) can provide relief.

Premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD)

Some women with PMS have very severe symptoms. This condition is called premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD). Symptoms of PMDD include severe depression, feelings of hopelessness, anger, anxiety, low self-esteem, difficulty concentrating, irritability, and tension. Women with PMDD often can't keep up their daily routines. In a group of one hundred women with severe PMS, as many as 50 to 60 of them may have PMDD as well.

When should you call Kaiser Permanente?

Many women have premenstrual syndrome (PMS) either before or during their menstrual periods. If you have severe symptoms, you may wonder whether you need to see your doctor

or other health care professional. Be sure to call your doctor if:

- PMS and/or PMDD symptoms regularly disrupt your life and keep you from doing your regular activities.
- PMS symptoms do not respond to home treatment.
- Significant PMS and/or PMDD symptoms (such as severe depression, anxiety, irritability, crying, or mood swings) do not end after a couple of days of your menstrual period.

For medical advice, consult with your doctor or other health care professional.

Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and much more.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.
- Association of Reproductive Health Professionals at arhp.org
- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists at acog.org
- Planned Parenthood at plannedparenthood.org and teenwire.com
- American Psychological Association at apa.org.

This information is not intended to diagnose or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. Herbs and supplements are sold over-the-counter. Kaiser Permanente carries only herb categories for which some evidence exists to show that the herbs may be effective to treat certain medical conditions.