

Premenstrual Syndrome

PMS may start a week or two before the beginning of a period. Common symptoms are breast tenderness, mood swings, headaches, backache and bloating. Experts still don't know why some women feel the effects of PMS so much more than others, but the problem is thought to be linked to out-of-balance hormones. The main culprits are oestrogen and progesterone. Levels of both can soar just before menstruation, then come crashing down. It may be that these fluctuations throw levels of the mood-regulating chemical serotonin out of kilter.

It's not just the mood swings and headaches. Not just the pain and bloating. What's so annoying if you're a PMS sufferer is the ongoing nature of the problem – this month's symptoms repeated next month and the month after that. Many experts now agree that the best prescription of all for premenstrual syndrome is not a drug or a supplement, but exercise. Walk, dance, swim every day, if you can, boosting the level of activity before symptoms begin.

Keep moving

Get at least 20 to 30 minutes of aerobic exercise every day, every month. Brisk walking and swimming are best. But if these forms of exercise seem a bit tame or boring, there's always skating, karate, kickboxing, water aerobics, dancing and much more. Try to exercise to the point of perspiration. If you keep up the good work, you will reduce the level of free-circulating oxygen in your system. Exercise both relieves stress and enhances mood because it boots your body's natural painkilling endorphins – feel good chemicals that make you feel better all over – while also relaxing your muscles. Furthermore, exercise combats fluid retention.

Dietary advice

Changes in diet and lifestyle have been shown to improve the health of 90% of women with PMS.

- Take 500mg of calcium and 250mg of magnesium a day. Research has shown that over 50% of women with this problem have a low level of magnesium*. Calcium reduces headaches, mood swings and muscle cramps. It also makes you sleepy, which is a good reason to take the supplement just before you go to bed.
- 50mg Vitamin B complex can help to reduce irritability and depression. Among its other powers it can help to calm jittery nerves by increasing your supply of serotonin, the mood regulating brain chemical. It also helps with fluid retention, breast tenderness, sugar cravings and fatigue. Lower all doses of supplements when symptoms begin to improve.

Eat regular small meals to beat irritability and fatigue and to give your body a constant supply of nutrients. Keep sugar consumption low, restrict your intake of dairy produce and avoid refined wheat foods, as both of these can contribute, as can more than three cups of coffee or tea a day. Try to cut out any junk food, including sweets, cakes and biscuits. Sweet cravings rocket when you have PMS, but sweets and biscuits send your blood sugar levels soaring. When blood sugar plummets later on, you'll feel tired and irritable. Limiting sugar intake and eating fruit when your body craves a 'sugar hit' can help to steady your mood.

Including more whole-foods such as brown rice, wholemeal bread, oats and beans, and at least five portions of fruit or vegetables per day. Include more nuts, sesame and sunflower seeds into your diet; sprinkle a tablespoon of linseeds and nuts over your cereal each morning, this should increase your levels of essential fatty acids, magnesium, iron, zinc and the vitamins E and B.

Eat less salt throughout the month, but especially in the week before your period. Salt increases fluid retention, hence more bloating. Processed foods such as tinned soups, cooking sauces and packaged snacks are especially high in salt so avoid them whenever possible. Even supermarket bread contains a lot of salt – check labels carefully, or bake your own.

* Raymond J. Shamberger 2003 Calcium, Magnesium, and Other Elements in the Red Blood Cells and Hair of Normals and Patients with Premenstrual Syndrome *Biological Trace Element Research*

Balance Therapy

Eat lots of fibre. High-fibre foods help to take excess oestrogen out of the body. Fill up on whole grains such as barley, oats and wholemeal breads, vegetables and beans.

Drink more water. When you do, more superfluous salt leaves in your urine. Aim for at least 8 large glasses a day.

Complementary remedies

- Take Chastberry (vitex) supplements. This herb is prized for its ability to improve PMS symptoms by bringing hormones back into balance. Take one or two 225mg capsules a day when not menstruating. Give it time – it can take up to six months before you feel the full benefit.
- Use Black Cohosh for a week to 10 days before your period begins. Often prescribed for menopausal hot flushes, Black Cohosh also works by levelling out hormones. Take two 40g capsules a day with food, and be prepared to give the herb four to eight weeks to begin working for you.
- St. John's Wort is a natural anti-depressant which can help with mood symptoms. The compounds in this flower relieve mild-to-moderate depression, including that caused by monthly hormonal fluctuations. DO NOT use St John's Wort with prescribed antidepressants or L-dopa. Take 300mg of an extract standardised to contain 0.3% hypericin three times a day for at least two cycles to help with a variety of physical and emotional symptoms.
- Kava-Kava is a calming herb which releases anxiety almost immediately. It also has pain relieving effects comparable to aspirin which can help reduce muscular pain, anxiety and agitation. Because of this you may want to begin taking Kava-Kava a few days before your period to ease PMS, and then continue taking it for the first few days of your period to relieve cramps.

The most commonly suggested aromatherapy oils for tension and anxiety are lavender and chamomile.

NEVER put 100% essential oil directly onto the skin. Dilute a total of 4-6 drops essential oil per 10ml carrier oil

To lift your spirits consider Rose Otto, Clary sage, bergamot and citrus essences, Clary sage, frankincense, ylang ylang, geranium and patchouli oil.

Home self treatments should start 7-10 days before a period and include:

- Baths
 - 6-8 drops essential oil – into bath water, never apply direct to the skin
- Compress
 - Add 2 drops of the blend to 200ml hot water. Fold a small towel to size, soak it in the mixture of hot water and oils, wring it out and place over the abdomen. You can use clingfilm or a bandage to hold the compress firmly in place, or even cuddle a hot water bottle to maintain the heat of the compress for as long as possible. For maximum benefit, re-soak the compress from time to time and keep in place for at least an hour.
- Self massage
 - 4-6 drops essential oil in 10ml carrier oil
- Inhalation
 - 1-3 drops essential oil on a tissue, inhaled at intervals

Also, try the following flower remedies

- Impatiens (for irritability and angry outbursts)
- Mustard (for depression)
- Scleranthus (for mood swings).

Balance Therapy

Meditation is one of the most natural and simple healing practices known to man; it can relieve stress, improve health and generally enhance quality of life.

- Start by making the decision to relax before you try and focus your mind. Sit comfortably in a quiet place with your eyes shut. Let your breathing become slow and gentle, think 'relax', push your shoulders down and, as you breathe out with a long sigh, let all the tension from your head to your toes flow out with it.

Reflexology has a proven track record with PMS and is a very effective in combating the debilitating affects.