

Family Medicine Clerkship Plain Language Summary

Title: Birth Control Options for Dysmenorrhea and Menstrual Cramps

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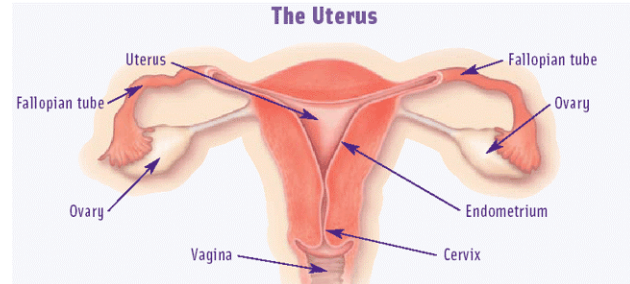
Plain Language Summary:

What is the menstrual cycle?

A normal menstrual cycle lasts 28 days.

The last 5 days are the period. For the first 14 days, the hormone estrogen is flowing through the body. Estrogen makes the endometrium, the inside lining of the uterus, grow thick and fluffy.

On day 14, the ovary releases an egg into the fallopian tube, which is the tube that connect the ovary to the uterus. On days 15-23, the egg moves along the fallopian tube into the uterus. At the same time, a second hormone called progesterone is now flowing through the body to get the uterus ready for a possible pregnancy. If the egg is not fertilized by day 23, the thick and fluffy endometrium must be shed from the uterus so the cycle can start over again. The uterus is a big ball of muscle, and it can contract just like you can contract the muscles in your arm. When the uterus contracts, it squeezes the blood vessels shut. Since no blood can get to the endometrium, it dies and falls off. A woman's period is when the dead endometrium is shed out the vagina.



What is dysmenorrhea?

Dysmenorrhea is painful menstrual cramps. Cramps are very common during a woman's period. Some women do not have any cramps and some women have very bad cramps. Sometimes these cramps are so bad that the woman can't go to work or it makes her sick to her stomach.

What causes dysmenorrhea?

There are a few things that cause these cramps:

1. The squeezing of the uterus can cause cramps.
2. Smoking, excess fat, having long or heavy periods, and alcohol have all been linked to bad cramps.
3. Some diseases can also make cramps worse. See below.

What treatments are available?

There are a few useful treatments for dysmenorrhea:

1. *Ibuprofen*: Ibuprofen is from the family of drugs called NSAIDs. This family of drugs stops the uterus from contracting. They also help with pain. These drugs can stop cramps for many women.
2. *Birth Control Pills*: Women who do not want to become pregnant can use birth control pills for their cramps. These pills contain both estrogen and progesterone hormones like your own body makes. There are two types that may work:
 - a. *Cyclic Birth Control*: These pills cause you to have a cycle that lasts 28 days. They are very good at treating cramps because they control what

your ovaries and uterus are doing. As a result, periods are less painful and a woman cannot get pregnant.

- b. *Extended Birth Control*: On these pills, women do not have their period for a few months at a time. These pills have been shown to be better for cramps than the cyclic birth control pills.
3. *Long-term Birth Control*: Other birth control types with hormones that spread out periods or stop them completely can also help reduce cramps. These methods are vaginal rings, hormone shots, skin patches, and devices that stay inside of your uterus for months to years at a time. Ask your doctor if these types of birth control are right for you.

When should I be worried about my cramps?

Cramps are usually a normal part of a woman's cycle. If you have really bad cramps that do not go away with NSAIDs or Birth Control pills, contact your doctor. Sometimes there may be other causes. Infection, cysts of the ovary, or uterine fibroids may be making cramps worse. These also will need to be treated differently.

Where can I get more information?

Dysmenorrhea - Medscape Reference:

<http://emedicine.medscape.com/article/253812-overview>

Menstrual Cramps – Mayo Clinic:

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/menstrual-cramps/DS00506>

Key Words:

Menstrual cramps

Birth control pills

Menstrual cycle

Dysmenorrhea

Contraception

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