



# Solving Menstrual Problems

## Supporting a Healthy Monthly Cycle

Many women suffer from needless pain or discomfort during their monthly hormonal cycle. These problems include serious pain, fatigue, headaches, bloating, and breast swelling, as well as mood disturbances including anger, anxiety, and depression. They usually occur just prior to the start of menstruation, and are collectively called PMS (pre-menstrual syndrome). Pain and heavy bleeding are also common problems that occur during menstruation.

If you experience any form of discomfort with your monthly cycle, this issue of *Sunshine Sharing* is for you. It will help you discover natural solutions to many of these problems. In it you'll learn various nutrients, herbs, and lifestyle changes that can help you experience a healthy, symptom-free cycle.

### Dysmenorrhea (Painful Periods)

Mild discomfort before or during a period is a common problem, with over 80% of women reporting that they experience it. Period pain is called dysmenorrhea and there are two forms. When pain occurs and there are no diseases in the female organs, the problem is labeled *primary dysmenorrhea*. The second type, *secondary dysmenorrhea*, involves additional problems like uterine fibroids, endometriosis, or adenomyosis.



Primary dysmenorrhea is common in young women and occurs because of high levels of prostaglandins secreted to make the uterus contract to help shed the uterine lining. This creates cramping and discomfort, which usually begins shortly before menstruation and lasts about three days. About 5-15% of women report the pain is so severe that it interferes with normal activities.

The standard treatment for primary dysmenorrhea is to use nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) like ibuprofen or naproxen. Some women also use acetaminophen. There are some natural alternatives to these medications that can actually work better with fewer side effects. Choosing the best remedies involves identifying the type of pain involved.

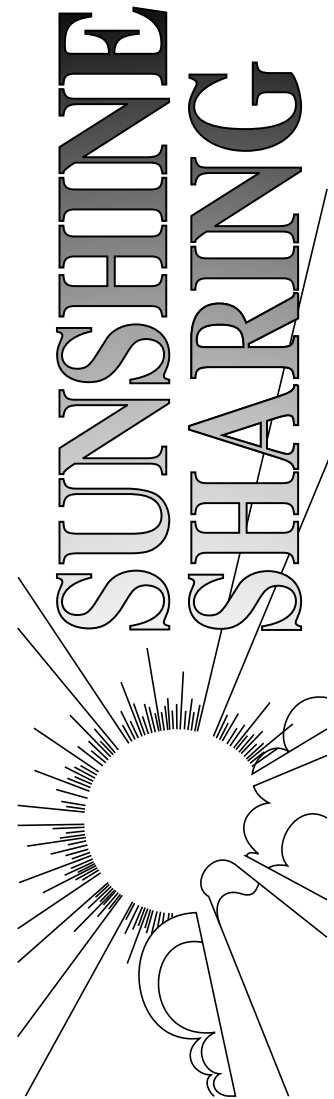
It should also be noted that the use of tobacco, alcohol, and caffeine may increase the risk of menstrual pain, while regular exercise can decrease it.

### Cramping Pain

If you experience sharp, cramping pain, this is best relieved by antispasmodic herbs. Commonly used antispasmodics used for menstrual cramps include black cohosh, wild yam, cramp bark, and lobelia. Two of these remedies are natural alternatives to NSAIDs, because they are also anti-inflammatory. Black cohosh contains salicylates, the forerunners to modern aspirin, and wild yam appears to enhance the action of the anti-inflammatory hormone cortisol. Lobelia is a strong antispasmodic for easing severe cramping and is best used in doses of 5-10 drops of a tincture (or as a small part of a formula).

You should also consider taking magnesium. About 70% of the population is deficient in this mineral and a lack of it will increase the intensity of the cramping. It will also contribute to muscle tension, anxiety, nervousness, insomnia, and headaches, making it a common root cause of other PMS symptoms. If this sounds like you, try taking 200 mg. of magnesium daily and gradually increase the dose to see if it helps. You may benefit from taking up to 400-800 mg. a day, but if you start to develop loose stools, back off on the dose.

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Your guide to better health the natural way.

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## Dull Pain

If the pain you experience is dull or congestive, rather than sharp or spastic, this may be due to blood stagnation. In this case, blood movers may be helpful. Dong quai is a blood mover that is often used in Chinese formulas for supporting healthy periods. Western herbs that may also be helpful include ginger, safflowers, and yarrow. Yarrow is particularly good if there is also heavy bleeding during the period or if you have uterine fibroids.

## Menorrhagia (Heavy Bleeding)

If you have any of the following problems during menstruation—soaking through tampons or pads within one or two hours, passing large blood clots, or having a period that lasts seven days or longer, you are experiencing *menorrhagia* or heavy menstrual bleeding. There are many potential causes of menorrhagia, so you should seek a medical diagnosis to determine the cause so you can work on the underlying issues.



## Combating Anemia

Whatever the cause, heavy bleeding is going to lead to anemia. Iron is an important nutrient to combat anemia. Unfortunately most iron supplements do not absorb well, which is why it is better to focus on eating iron rich foods or herbs to build the blood.

The heme iron in red meat is one of the most easily absorbed forms of iron. If you don't eat red meat, there are plenty of other iron-rich foods you can consider. These include dark, leafy green vegetables (like kale, collard, and dandelion greens), dried fruits (like apricots, raisins, and figs), and legumes. Blackstrap molasses is also a good source of iron.

In Chinese medicine, women regularly take herbal formulas during their child-bearing years that contain herbs that nourish the blood to compensate for the monthly blood loss. These formulas contain herbs like dong quai, white peony, rehmannia, lycium, and bupleurum. Try a *Chinese Wood-Increasing Formula* containing these ingredients, particularly if you feel pale, cold, and tired.

Western herbalists have used nettle leaf, yellow dock, alfalfa, and beet root to supply iron and build the blood. So, a Western *Herbal Iron Formula* may also be helpful. Iron cannot be properly utilized without a variety of vitamins, including vitamin C, folate, and vitamin B12. So make sure you have adequate intake of these nutrients as well.

## Reducing Bleeding

A number of herbs may also be helpful to reduce blood loss. These include yarrow, cinnamon, bayberry rootbark, lady's mantle, and shepherd's purse. One or two capsules of yarrow or cinnamon taken three times a day would be a good place to start. You could also try a *Menstrual Styptic Formula* containing these herbs. It may help to slow down the bleeding and tone up the uterus to reduce future problems with menorrhagia.

## Hormone Imbalances

Heavy bleeding is often associated with an imbalance between estrogen and progesterone. Estrogen dominance will not only make bleeding heavier, it will also contribute to premenstrual anxiety and anger and severe menstrual cramps. Birth control pills may be prescribed for this problem as they are progesterone-based and help counteract the excess estrogen. If you have problems that suggest you may have excess estrogen and deficient progesterone, see the sidebar *Correcting Estrogen Dominance* on the next page.

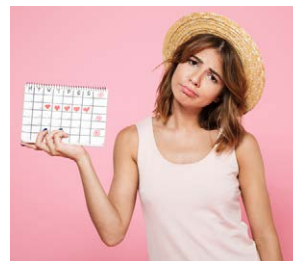
## Cycle-Related Mood Swings

Imbalances in your hormones can cause various mood problems during your cycle. Most of these tend to occur right before menses and are major PMS symptoms. The type of mood problems you experience help determine which direction your hormones are out of balance.

## Anger and Anxiety

If you tend to feel anxious or irritable before your period this indicates PMS Type A. This is the most common type of PMS (about 80%) and is caused by excess estrogen and deficient progesterone. Excessive estrogen will cause an increase in levels of the stimulating neurotransmitters epinephrine, norepinephrine, and serotonin. It can also decrease levels of the calming neurotransmitters dopamine and phenylalanine. This can make you feel more agitated and less calm.

To correct this imbalance, it helps to take magnesium and vitamin B6. You can also take calming nervines like lavender, angelica, and chamomile as part of a *Relaxing Nervine Formula*. Also follow the suggestions for *Correcting Estrogen Dominance* (next page).



## Sadness and Depression

Depression and sadness are primary indicators for PMS Type D. This less-common imbalance (about 20%) involves too much progesterone and not enough estrogen. Anxiety and occasional anger may also be part of this picture, but there is a stronger tendency to emotional sensitivity (crying easily), absent-minded, confusion, lack of motivation, and possibly being accident prone. This happens because excess progesterone depresses brain function.

Black cohosh is a good herb for this because it helps tip the hormonal balance in favor of estrogen. It is also good for other types of hormonally-related depression, such as postpartum depression and depression during menopause. Other herbs that can help increase estrogen levels include flax seeds, hops, and red clover. Eating soy products, like tofu, will also be helpful. You can also use essential oils like clary sage, pink grapefruit, and rose.

Magnesium is particularly important for this type of PMS. Vitamin B6 and SAM-e might also be helpful. Another remedy to consider is the *Chinese Qi-Lifting Formula*. It contains some of the herbs used in TCM for women's problems, such as bupleurum,

ligusticum, and dong quai, along with herbs that lift the mood and reduce feelings of anxiety.

## Irregular Menstruation

If your menstrual cycle does not follow the usual twenty-eight day pattern (too long, too short, or shifting from shorter periods to longer periods) there are several herbs that can be helpful. Chaste tree or vitex is particularly helpful to help with an irregular cycle. It appears to help normalize estrogen and progesterone levels via the pituitary. False unicorn is another herb that has been used to help regulate the cycle.

Short cycles may be caused by estrogen dominance, while long cycles tend to indicate progesterone dominance. Herbs to consider for short cycles include false unicorn, chaste tree, and wild yam. Herbs you might take if your cycles are too long include black cohosh, flax seeds, soybean, and hops.

## Food Cravings Associated with Periods

Blood sugar levels tend to fall naturally during the latter half of the cycle. The drop in blood sugar (a hypoglycemic reaction) results in food cravings, particularly for sugar and carbohydrates. These food cravings are labeled PMS type C and may accompany either PMS Type A or D.



Chocolate is a common craving and there are several reasons why this makes sense. For starters, chocolate is a good source of magnesium, which may be deficient in all forms of PMS. It also supplies zinc and phenylalanine, which aids the production of calming neurotransmitters. It also enhances oxytocin and endorphins, which help a person feel good. Cocoa also contains anandamide, an endogenous cannabinoid, which plays a role in the regulation of appetite, pleasure, pain reduction, and sleep.

So, chocolate may actually be helpful for easing PMS symptoms. Just make sure that you use a quality dark chocolate so you don't spike your blood sugar.

Cravings for carbohydrates and sweets are also common, but it's important to avoid white flour and sugar because these nutritionally-deficient foods will only make the problem worse. Instead, make sure you get adequate protein and some good fats like coconut oil, butter, and an omega-3 fatty acid supplement. Chromium may also be helpful. If you do eat carbohydrates focus on whole grains and fruits.

## Fluid Retention

Water retention is a common issue that happens during PMS. It is believed to be caused by too much aldosterone, a hormone produced by the adrenal glands. This may cause abdominal bloating and breast swelling and tenderness. To correct this imbalance, magnesium and vitamin B6 are again helpful, along with vitamin E, omega-3 essential fatty acids, and GLA, which is found in evening primrose oil and borage oil.

To help with fluid retention you can reduce salt consumption and increasing potassium-rich fruits and vegetables like bananas,

oranges, apricots, broccoli, peas, zucchini, and leafy greens. Herbs like parsley and dandelion leaf are also rich in potassium and are mild diuretics. If fluid retention is severe, use a *Diuretic Formula* that contains mild diuretic herbs like parsley, dandelion, cleavers, watermelon seed, and cornsilk.

Tenderness or swelling in the breasts may be due to lymphatic congestion. Improve lymphatic drainage by using herbs like cleavers, red clover, burdock, and mullein. Consider a *Lymphatic Cleansing Formula* containing these herbs and be sure to drink plenty of water.

## Skin Problems

If you experience outbreaks of acne during your cycle, this may be due to elevated levels of androgens from stress. Chronic stress will eventually fatigue the adrenal glands, so supporting them with an *Anti-Stress B-Complex Supplement* containing B-complex vitamins, vitamin C, and adaptogens like schisandra will be helpful.

The liver may be involved with all types of menstrual issues because it is responsible for breaking down excess hormones and neurotransmitters to maintain a healthy balance in the body.

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## Correcting Estrogen Dominance

Although women can have low estrogen, it's very common for women in modern society to have too much estrogen. Too much estrogen increases the stimulating neurotransmitters epinephrine, norepinephrine, and serotonin levels, while decreasing levels of the calming neurotransmitter dopamine.

This gives rise to feeling nervous, angry, and aggressive, which are classic symptoms of PMS Type A. Excess estrogen is associated with uterine fibroids, heavy menstrual bleeding, painful menstruation, and estrogen-dependent cancers like breast and uterine cancer.

The main reason many women have too much estrogen is not because their bodies are making it. It comes from estrogen-mimicking compounds known as xenoestrogens. The primary sources for these come from certain pesticides, ingredients in soft plastics, hormones fed to animals, and some cosmetics. Avoiding xenoestrogens by eating organically-grown food, and using glass or stainless steel containers instead of plastic ones is a good place to start in avoiding these chemicals.

It also helps to support the liver's ability to detoxify estrogens to get rid of these chemicals. Sulfation is the primary liver pathway for doing this. Foods high in sulfur compounds like cruciferous vegetables, along with onions and garlic, will be helpful. One of the compounds found in cruciferous vegetables like broccoli, cauliflower, and cabbage is indole-3-carbinol, which can also be purchased as a nutritional supplement. It is particularly helpful in ridding the body of xenoestrogens and can reduce the risk of uterine fibroids and estrogen-dependent cancers.



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However, if you have skin problems associated with your cycle it is especially important to use a good *Detoxifying Formula* to clean out your system. It should contain blood purifiers like yellow dock, burdock, sarsaparilla, red clover, dandelion and Oregon grape.

## Related Problems

Many of the remedies previously mentioned may help provide some symptomatic relief or even help to clear up problems related to menstrual discomfort such as endometriosis and uterine fibroids.

However, you'll also need to take additional steps to clear up these conditions. Consider taking herbs to support your liver and aid hormonal balance, paying special attention to the problem

of estrogen dominance. Consult with the person who gave this newsletter to you for suggestions.

## Additional Help and Information

For more information about solving menstrual problems contact the person who gave you this newsletter. You can also consult the following:

*Strategies for Health* by Steven Horne

*The Complete Woman's Herbal* by Anne McIntyre

*Herbal Healing for Women* by Rosemary Gladstar

*Herbal Remedies for Women* by Amanda McQuade Crawford

*Women's Herbs Women's Health* by Christopher Hobbs and Kathi Keville

## Getting Off the Pill

Birth control pills contain synthetic hormones, particularly progesterone mimics. These hormones alter your monthly cycle to prevent conception. In particular, the synthetic progesterone in birth control pills down regulates your body's production of progesterone. If you decide to stop taking birth control, it can cause a temporary up-regulation in estrogen. This adjustment can show up in several ways.

First, your cycles may be irregular for a time. This includes developing amenorrhea (a lack of periods). Periods may also be heavier, with more bleeding and cramping, as the sudden loss of progesterone activity results in a temporary estrogen dominance.

Hormonally-related acne is a fairly common symptom in the first few months after discontinuing the pill, similar to what happens with the hormonal changes during puberty. There may also be an increase in facial hair (hirsutism) due to an up regulation of androgens. There may also be changes in sex drive, either an increased or decreased libido.

Weight changes can occur, often in the form of weight loss. Breast swelling and tenderness may also occur, along with other PMS-type symptoms such as mood changes. For instance, if there

were feelings of anxiety or depression prior to starting the pill, these problems may return.

If you experience symptoms associated with PMS Type A (excess estrogen) you should eat some of the foods listed under *Correcting Estrogen Dominance* on page 3, particularly the ones with indole-3-carbinol. It can also be helpful to take calcium d-glucorate, which helps the body remove excess hormones. This supplement can be helpful for breast pain and difficult periods because it helps prevent the body from reabsorbing and recycling hormones.

Depending on your health and how long you've been on the pill, it can take from one to several months for the system to rebalance itself. There are also a number of herbs that can help restore balance more quickly when discontinuing the pill. These include chase tree (vitex), maca, and tribulus.

Research has shown vitex can be helpful in the treatment of PMS, dysmenorrhoea, infertility, and mastalgia (breast pain), all of which can occur when discontinuing the pill. Maca contains phytoestrogens that can help restore both libido and fertility, making it especially useful to help regain fertility more quickly.

