

Understanding and Treating PMS

PMS is a natural biological rhythm-cycle, which has become distorted and thus experienced as dysfunctional by habits of living and patterns of perceptions. It is a biological condition with interactive components manifested by a constellation of physical, behavioral and emotional symptoms.

All women share these powerful hormone-emotion based cycles, which are experienced on a continuum from imperceptible to subtle to overwhelming. These monthly patterns vary according to our age, our relationships with self and others, and adjustments through life crisis.

A biologically and perhaps genetically determined vulnerability to PMS may result in spontaneous PMS problems or the PMS may be activated when experiences, attitudes, beliefs, coping patterns, and social forces interact to stress a woman.

Even though PMS is complex, relief from the discomfort, no matter how severe, does successfully come from a number of changes you can make in your diet, exercise, and life style. Many women are able to maintain normal lives with these changes; only occasionally may medications be required.

Several other medical problems can present like PMS thus your physician will need to do a thorough physical and often laboratory exam, as well as have you do some calendaring of your symptoms to confirm the diagnosis

Diet

1. Eat small meals every 3-4 hours (as many as 6 per day)
2. Choose foods that are high in complex carbohydrates. This includes fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Limit the amount of fat you eat. This would include fried foods and cheeses, which are high in fat.
3. Increase the amount of protein you eat. Good sources are fish, poultry and legumes. You will need to avoid red meats.
4. Try to avoid sugar, even if you crave sweets. Eat foods high in complex carbohydrates instead. If you do eat sweets, do so with a main meal. This will prevent that sudden burst of high sugar from affecting you quite as severely.
5. Avoid caffeine if you have breast pain or feel irritable, nervous, or light-headed.
6. Avoid salt if you feel bloated or if your hands and feet swell.
7. Choose nonfat or low-fat dairy products. You do not need to eliminate dairy foods from your diet!

8. If you have joint or muscle aching, supplement your diet with Calcium at 1gm/day (1,000 mg). The best absorbing sources are chewable ones, like TUMS or Os-Cal 500. All pre-menopausal women need about 1,200 mg of calcium each day to continue to build strong bones.
9. Avoid alcohol, which can cause more depression, bloating and swelling, irritability and poor coping responses.

Exercise

1. Moderate aerobic exercise has been scientifically proven to help women with PMS. This is one of the most important and most helpful changes you can make.
2. Do not ask yourself whether you feel like exercising the week before your period as too often the answer will be “no”. Instead, make it a habit you do routinely 3-4 times a week for at least 30 minutes. Make it easy to do. Vigorous walking is a good exercise. Take your tennis shoes to work and go walking at lunch, or before or after work, and on the weekends. If you try to go to the gym or swim, you might not make it.
3. Make all your days “active” ones. Do stretching, breathing and lots of movements with your activities whenever you can.

Stress

1. You and your family members will need to learn that not all uncomfortable feelings are the result of PMS. The PMS syndrome does **NOT** explain all mood changes, depression, anxiety, or fatigue you may be feeling. Feelings of irritability and anger, and even changes in your mood are normal and appropriate. They do not have to be explained away in an apologetic manner as “just my PMS”. You will need to learn to trust and take responsibility for your feelings as normal and appropriate.
2. Changing the stress in your life may require changing your attitudes, expectations, coping style, social support and family dynamics. Often there are unresolved family, personal, or work related issues that cause you stress. Even though it can be painful, you do get control over these stressful areas of your life, by “just having PMS”. If you are to have the most success in lessening your PMS symptoms, you may need to address these unresolved issues and find ways to ease the burdens you experience because of them. Excessive and unbalanced home, childcare and even parent care responsibilities may need to be addressed. Have all your family members start helping more. Prioritize your life. If you have non-communicative spouses and relationships, then seek counseling. If there are other abuses from family members such as alcoholism or drug abuse or other psychological traumas in the present or past, seek counseling. If difficult or unfulfilling career and work situations are causing you stress, then define what you really want, then “go for it”, and/or seek counseling.

3. Try to schedule stressful events for the weeks after your period. Give yourself permission to prioritize what is really important.
4. Exercising regularly will definitely relieve tension and should be emphasized here again.
5. Take several 10 minute relaxing breathers during each and every day.
6. Have your family members come with you to your doctor's appointment so they can learn about PMS too. This kind of support can be very helpful.

Ways to Manage Stress

To get started here are a few simple but powerful ways for you to begin to manage stress more effectively.

1. Give yourself permission to reduce stress! Don't allow yourself to fall victim to the much used exclamation "Oh my gosh, I can't do that, I have too much to do!"
2. Accept, without judging yourself, what you can and cannot do, or choose not to do.
3. Realistically assess the situation. Know your limits and set them.
4. Breathe slowly, and deeply in and out. Relax!
5. Worry less about what you should do! Who is in control of your life anyhow?
6. Stop feeling guilty. Assess your feelings and take responsibility for them!
7. Breathe slowly, and deeply in and out. Relax!
8. Know that you are entitled to change your mind. Reassessing a situation is flexibility, and not a sign of instability.
9. Take one thing at a time. Let yourself feel successful. Realistic time management is essential. Don't feel like a failure because you cram too much into one day.
10. Walk, talk and drive slower. It reduces the sense of urgency, irritation, and anxiety.
11. Breathe slowly, and deeply in and out. Relax!
12. Reduce ambiguity. Develop clear-cut boundaries and put into action what you know you need to do. No "ifs" and "maybes". Be assertive
13. Expect emotional flare-ups during PMS, and don't take them personally. Know what you are dealing with. This in itself will give you and your family a sense of control and direction.
14. Educate significant others about your need for understanding and support. That you need "space" to take care of your needs.
15. Breathe slowly, and deeply in and out. Relax!
16. Decrease anticipatory and catastrophic thinking. Remain in the present. Thinking about the future and all that needs to be done is type thinking. This creates stress and anxiety.
17. Confide and confront feelings by keeping a journal or seeking out a friend.
18. Reduce hostility by expressing feelings. Don't stockpile them. When PMS rolls around, you are a potential volcano! Take care of your resentments by either writing

19. them down or addressing the person you hold these resentments toward. Do this a few days before PMS arrives.
20. Relaxation exercises are helpful. This along with a feeling of being understood and accepted is essential in stress management. **Take the time to do this for yourself. It only takes a matter of minutes during the day.**

Medications

1. Most women will not need medications.
2. Discuss all drugs you are taking or want to try with your doctor. Even vitamin therapy for PMS can be toxic or cause severe side effects.

The PMS Calendar

1. Start the calendar on the first day of your period. The day you start bleeding is considered the first day of your menstrual cycle. In the date box above the number 1 write the date (see the attached example calendar). If you do not have periods, begin a new PMS calendar sheet with the first day of each month. Be sure to make extra copies of this calendar for future use.
2. Weigh yourself each morning, **BEFORE** you eat or drink anything, but after you empty your bladder, and if possible your bowels. Record the results on the weight line.
3. On the 1st line, “Bleeding” mark amount of flow using: **H**=heavy, **M**=medium, **L**=light, **S**=spotting only
4. List the most common or severe physical and emotional symptoms you experience with PMS. Every woman has a slightly different set of symptoms, but common ones you can choose from are listed below. Once you have chosen the set of symptoms that you are going to be monitoring, write them down in the symptoms section on the side of your calendar.
5. Daily, at the end of the day, note if you experienced any symptoms. Estimate the severity, and write the number down in the box opposite the symptom and below the appropriate date. The scale is 1-5. 1=minimal to 5=severe.\
6. Always mark your symptoms on your calendar on the day you feel them. Do not forget, and then go back and do several days at the same time, because you will tend to under or over rate the severity. Recording on the day you experience the symptom is the most accurate assessment. This is very important.
7. When you start your next period, start a new calendar, thus each menstrual cycle will have one calendar. Bring all of your calendars to each doctor’s visit.



Physical

Abdominal bloating
Asthma
Backache
Breast Pain
Constipation
Craving Sweets
Dizziness
Swelling Feet
Fatigue
Intestinal upset
Headache
Increased Appetite
Joint & Muscle Pain
Thirst
Weight Gain

Emotional

Aggressiveness
Agitation
Anger or Hostility
Anxiety or tension
Confusion
Crying Spells
Depression
Hostility
Impaired Concentration
Inability to Cope
Lack of Energy
Mood Swings
Nervousness
Social Withdrawal
Suicidal Thoughts

(Created 09/02)

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

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