



# Menstrual cramps

Menstrual cramps are also called painful periods. Most females have them at sometime during their lives.

## SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

- Pain or discomfort in the lower abdomen right before or with a menstrual period, which can range from mild to severe.
- Pain occurs with a backache, fatigue, headache, diarrhea and/or vomiting.
- Symptoms can vary from month to month or year to year.



## CAUSES

Menstrual cramps occur when muscles of the uterus squeeze the lining out. This is a part of normal menstruation. They occur often in females who have just begun to menstruate. They may go away or become less severe after a woman reaches her mid-twenties or gives birth. (Childbirth stretches the uterus.)

Menstrual cramps occur much less often in women who do not ovulate. In fact, birth control pills reduce painful periods in most females who take them. When the birth control pill is stopped, the same level of pain returns.

## TREATMENT

Self-care measures treat most cases of menstrual cramps. If not, a doctor can diagnose the cause and prescribe treatment.





## TRIAGE QUESTIONS



Do you have any signs of infection, such as fever and foul-smelling vaginal discharge or do you have black stools or blood in the stools?

NO

YES ➔ SEE DOCTOR



Have your periods been very painful since having an intrauterine device (IUD) inserted?

NO

YES ➔ SEE DOCTOR



Is the pain extreme or have you had pain-free periods for years, but are now having severe cramps?

NO

YES ➔ SEE DOCTOR



Does cramping continue even after your period is over or longer than 3 days?

NO

YES ➔ SEE DOCTOR



Do any of these things apply?

- Bleeding with a period is a lot heavier than normal or includes blood clots that are larger than a quarter.
- You could be newly pregnant (your period is late by one week or longer) and you have pain that feels like menstrual cramps.

NO

YES ➔ CALL DOCTOR



USE SELF-CARE



## SELF-CARE

### To Relieve Menstrual Cramps

- Take an over-the-counter pain reliever, such as ibuprofen, naproxen sodium, or aspirin. These nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) relieve pain and inhibit the release of prostaglandins. Acetaminophen will help with pain, too. Most over-the-counter menstrual discomfort products contain acetaminophen. Read labels.

{**Note:** Do not give aspirin or any medication with salicylates to anyone 19 years of age or younger due to its link with Reye's Syndrome.}

- Hold a heating pad or hot-water bottle on your abdomen or lower back.
- Take a warm bath.
- Gently massage your abdomen.
- Do mild to moderate exercise, such as walk, cycle, or do yoga. Stretch.

- When you can, lie on your back. Support your knees with a pillow.
- Get plenty of rest. Limit stress as your period nears.
- Drink a cup of regular, chamomile, or mint tea.
- Consider using birth control pills or the Mirena® IUD. These lessen menstrual cramps.

If you still feel pain after using self-care measures, call your doctor.



**FOR MORE INFORMATION:**  
Office on Women's Health  
[womenshealth.gov](http://womenshealth.gov)