



Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS)

What is PMS?

Premenstrual syndrome, also called premenstrual tension, is a term applied to a group of physical and emotional symptoms which occur in women during a specific period of time before the onset of the monthly menstrual period, with a symptom-free period of time following the monthly menses.

What are the Symptoms?

The symptoms vary for each person. They may include mood swings, anxiety, hostility, irritability, headache, craving for sweets along with an increased appetite and craving for chocolate, depression, forgetfulness, and crying and confusion. Physical symptoms include weight gain, swelling of extremities, breast tenderness, and abdominal bloating. In general, PMS is described as a feeling that makes coping difficult.

Is PMS Common?

Some people do not believe PMS exists except as another general vague complaint. Others think it is a mental attitude, and still others believe it is part of being a woman--being unpredictable, changeable, moody, and even hysterical. It is most common in women ages 20 to 40. An estimated 15-20 million women are affected. Studies indicate that 20-40% of all women suffer some degree of PMS that alters their lifestyle.

What causes PMS?

The causes of PMS are not yet known or fully understood. Explanations include progesterone deficiency, vitamin deficiency, prolactin excess, stress, and other psychosomatic causes. It is believed to be a neuro-endocrine disorder occurring from altered hormonal balance. One current theory is that of an imbalance of the two primary female hormones, estrogen and progesterone. Just after ovulation, levels of progesterone should be higher than levels of estrogen. Excess estrogen should be inactivated by the liver with the help of B-vitamins, especially B₆. If the liver is unable to deactivate estrogen, an imbalance of progesterone and estrogen occurs. The symptoms appear during the ovulatory phase of the menstrual cycle, the last two weeks before menstruation begins. Treatment based on this theory is aimed at helping the body correct the hormone balance.

How is PMS Diagnosed?

Diagnosing PMS is not a matter of a medical test or merely acknowledging the symptoms. The timing of symptoms in each menstrual cycle is crucial to the diagnosis and so is the absence of symptoms after the menstrual period. Keeping a daily record or chart for at least two cycles is the best way to get a handle on what is happening before diagnosis or treatment is begun. Other problems which can have symptoms similar to those of PMS must be ruled out.

Treatment

Here is what you can do for yourself:

1. Educate yourself and your loved ones about PMS with books, articles, etc.

2. Begin some diet changes.
 - a. Reduce intake of salt, refined sugar, caffeine (coffee, tea, chocolate, cola), and alcohol.
 - b. Use complex carbohydrates, such as whole grains, vegetables, and fruits and reduce starchy foods and pastries.
 - (Over)**
 - c. Increase protein with small, frequent meals. This will help stabilize your blood sugar levels. Foods high in protein are meat (especially fish and poultry), cheese, and eggs.
 - d. Become aware of stress factors in your life and, if possible, get some counseling or classes to help you deal more effectively with stress. Especially, reduce stress during the PMS symptoms by allowing for special rest periods, time alone, and special self-care.
3. Take a general vitamin and mineral supplement and mineral supplement on a daily basis, with a good diet. These supplements are absorbed better with food.
4. Take additional B₆ during the last two weeks of the cycle. Recommended dosage starts with 150 mg per day with meals in divided doses. Check with your practitioner.
5. Take a magnesium supplement in tablet form or Milk of Magnesia (1 or 2 tsp. per day) during the last two weeks of the cycle. If diarrhea occurs, reduce the dosage.
6. Add or increase outdoor exercise. This aids in the neuro-endocrine balance by increasing the endorphins. Exercise can be walking, jogging, bicycle riding, or other activity. Start with twenty minutes three times a week and add up to a half hour a day during the last two weeks of the cycle. Indoor exercise is helpful, but not as effective as outdoor exercise.
7. Chart your PMS symptoms daily on a comprehensive menstrual calendar.

A Word About Progesterone

Taking progesterone in the form of a synthetic pill or natural suppository is still controversial, but it has been known to significantly help severe sufferers. Natural progesterone is synthesized from yams and soybeans. Although progesterone has been used to treat PMS in England for more than 35 years, there are no long-term controlled studies of its safety, and studies of effectiveness are confusing. As with any drug treatment, you must weigh the risks and cost of treatment against the severity of the problem.

Other Treatments

Evening Primrose Oil (gammalinolenic acid) has been shown to be a highly effectively treatment of PMS in several double blind studies. It has been effective in treatment of depression and irritability, breast pain and tenderness, and fluid retention. It can be purchased over the counter in the form of Enamel 0.5 gm. Recommended dosage varies and it is best to check with your practitioner to guide your individual needs. Other dietary treatments have been suggested, as well as acupuncture treatments of the kidney, liver, and spleen, and herbal treatments. These have not been well studied.

One Last Thought

Quality of life is important, not only for your well-being, but also for people who are important to you and you to them. Some extra care invested in yourself can go a long way.