



Women's Health Connection

What You Should Know About ... **PMS**

Premenstrual syndrome (PMS) is a monthly condition that wreaks havoc on millions of women—as well as their spouses, families, friends and co-workers—all over the world. Women of all types, sizes, races, and ages suffer from a wide range of PMS symptoms.

So why is such a common condition still such a problem and its treatment still such a mystery? Perhaps because solving the complex puzzle of PMS takes education, perseverance and time.

As our logo suggests, Women's Health Connection is dedicated to helping women who suffer from PMS solve that monthly puzzle. We will work with you and your healthcare practitioner to determine the best treatment for your specific symptoms.

Solving the Puzzle

To determine the nature and severity of your symptoms, your healthcare practitioner will probably ask you to keep a daily [symptom chart](#) prior to diagnosis (*see example included*). The chart provided by your practitioner may be more or less detailed than our example since there are many different styles of symptom charts; the most important aspect is that you complete the chart every day for three or more consecutive months. The more diligent and consistent you are in describing your symptoms on a daily basis for several months running, the more likely you are to obtain an accurate diagnosis and determine an effective treatment.

The symptoms of PMS cover a very broad range, including everything from acne to food cravings and headaches. Document any and all symptoms on your daily chart, paying special attention to those that *occur in the weeks before menstruation and stop when menstruation begins* (or shortly thereafter). These cyclical symptoms are the ones that are most likely related to PMS, and the ones you and your healthcare practitioner will want to observe as you

begin treatment. It is equally important to continue charting during treatment so that you and your practitioner can compare the chart before, during, and after to see the effects on your symptoms.

Understanding the Factors

Determining the best treatment for your specific symptoms may require some trial and error (working with your healthcare practitioner), but a basic understanding of some of the underlying factors associated with PMS will help get you started on the road to symptom relief.

Given that PMS symptoms fluctuate with the hormonal cycle, we must recognize hormone balance as a key underlying factor. However, there are many other factors that affect hormone balance, including diet and nutrition, stress, exercise and other lifestyle choices. It is difficult to separate their effects from each other, especially when we start to make changes in one area or another. This will certainly be true as we begin to solve the puzzle of which treatment will work best to relieve which specific PMS symptom.

Hormone Imbalances

Many women with moderate to severe PMS symptoms demonstrate a hormone imbalance typically summarized as an elevated ratio of estrogen to progesterone. This excess of estrogen is associated with a vitamin B6 deficiency as well as a condition known as *cholestasis* or a "sluggish liver," whereby liver function is somewhat diminished (even though standard liver function test results may indicate that it is normal). The theory is that an excess of estrogen hormones impairs vitamin B6 function, including detoxification and elimination of those toxins by the liver. An estrogen excess can be treated with a natural progesterone supplement to reestablish the proper hormone ratio. Vitamin B6 is also essential for maintaining hormone balance, once it is achieved.

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When dealing with a hormone imbalance, eliminating the possibility of low thyroid function is also important. PMS symptoms and those of a thyroid hormone deficiency can overlap, making diagnosis of one or the other condition difficult. Because thyroid function is critical to maintaining all other hormone balance, sometimes thyroid hormone supplements will help reduce or eliminate symptoms apparently related to PMS.

Nutritional Deficiencies

Other key factors that affect hormone balance (and PMS) include diet and nutrition. Healthcare practitioners will often begin treating PMS by suggesting dietary modifications to try to eliminate foods that may trigger or exacerbate PMS symptoms. For example, caffeine can cause irritability and breast tenderness in some women and a high-sugar diet can heighten the “peaks and valleys” in a woman’s day, leading to fatigue.

Nutritional deficiency is fairly common among women who suffer from the most severe PMS symptoms. Research and anecdotal evidence suggest that several key vitamin and mineral deficiencies are linked to PMS symptoms. Most notably, many healthcare practitioners report that women with moderate to severe PMS symptoms, especially those who take birth control pills, tend to be deficient in vitamin B6.

Supplements containing high doses of vitamin B6 have been effective in alleviating PMS symptoms such as bloating, headaches, sugar cravings and fatigue for many women. Vitamin B6 has also been effective in treating irritability and moodiness, which is not surprising since B6 is essential for producing serotonin, also known as the “feel good” hormone. In addition to B6, other important B vitamins that also aid in PMS symptom relief include choline and inositol, both of which help the liver break down fatty foods and fat-soluble hormones such as estrogen.

Vitamin E also has ties to PMS, as well as to the overall health of the hormone system. Vitamin E supplements have been effective in significantly reducing or eliminating PMS-related breast tenderness, as well as reducing headaches, fatigue, insomnia and depression among PMS sufferers.

Magnesium is also thought to be linked to PMS symptoms, particularly those related to mood. A

magnesium deficiency is also known to decrease the pain threshold such that generalized aches and pains seem more severe. Magnesium supplements have been effective in decreasing cramps, reducing sugar cravings (by normalizing glucose metabolism) and stabilizing moods. Note that vitamin B6 is essential for magnesium to enter the body’s cells, so supplements containing both tend to be more effective than taking either one on its own.

Abnormalities in the metabolism of essential fatty acids are also common in women with PMS symptoms. This conversion requires adequate levels of vitamin B6 and magnesium, so it is understandable that a deficiency in any one of these may demonstrate multiple effects. The best sources of essential fatty acids are from food, primarily omega-3 oils from fish, although some women report benefits from supplements containing flaxseed oil or evening primrose oil.

Herbal supplements, including those containing chasteberry and phytoestrogen-containing herbs such as dong quai, black cohosh and licorice, have been used by women around the world for centuries to relieve PMS symptoms. Although they have not been thoroughly tested according to modern-day standards, many people believe these herbs help improve hormone balance and nourish the female glands and organs, providing a general “tonic” effect that soothes a broad range of PMS symptoms.

Considering Treatment Options

The treatments most often considered first for treating PMS symptoms include those that help rebalance the estrogen-to-progesterone ratio, such as natural progesterone or multi-vitamin/multi-mineral supplements that foster hormone balance by metabolizing or neutralizing excess estrogen hormones.

As you can see from this brief discussion, solving the PMS puzzle can be challenging, to the point of becoming overwhelming. However, with the help and guidance of your healthcare practitioner, you should be able to identify your most debilitating symptoms and select treatment options specifically targeted to relieving those symptoms. To succeed, it is critical to discuss any hormonal, nutritional or herbal treatments with your practitioner, who will help you manage their complex interactions.