

NIH News in Health

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Period Problems

Fibroids, Endometriosis, and Other Issues

Getting your period is a fact of life for most women. But every woman's period is different. So how do you know if yours is causing problems that it shouldn't?

Many girls and women get cramps, low back pain, fatigue, or discomfort with their periods. But some have pain so bad they miss days of work or school every month. Others experience such heavy bleeding that it exhausts them.

These are things that may signal a bigger issue. But some women find talking about menstrual issues embarrassing.

"Women tend not to talk about pelvic pain or bleeding," says Dr. Lisa Halvorson, a women's health expert at NIH. "But the menstrual cycle is a critical part of your health."

You can't know about your treatment options unless you talk with your doctor.

Common Issues • Most women's menstrual cycles range between 21 to 35 days, or up to 45 days for teens. Bleeding usually lasts between three to seven days. It's important for women to get to know their own pattern. What's normal for one woman may not be for another.

The most common menstrual irregularities are not getting your period at all or not getting it regularly, getting it for too many or too few days, or having severely painful cramps.



These issues can be caused by many different things, including scarring, hormonal imbalances, certain diseases or conditions, and even some medications.

Two of the most common disorders that cause period problems are uterine fibroids and endometriosis.

Fibroids are tumors, or growths, made of muscle cells and other types of cells that grow inside or outside of the wall of the uterus, or womb.

Studies estimate that more than 70% of women in the U.S. have at least one fibroid during their lives. But most women who have them don't have symptoms.

Endometriosis is caused by tissue normally found in the uterus growing outside it on other organs. Many women with endometriosis never have any symptoms. But some have life-altering ones.

"Endometriosis probably accounts

for at least a third of infertility in women," Halvorson explains.

Fibroids, endometriosis, and other menstrual issues can cause a range of symptoms (see the Wise Choices box). Your doctor can help you figure out what's causing the symptoms.

Very heavy bleeding during a woman's period is the most common symptom of fibroids. Severe pain that gets worse around the time of a woman's period is the most common symptom of endometriosis.

Both fibroids and endometriosis can run in families, explains Dr. Ayman Al-Hendy, an NIH-funded gynecologist at the University of Illinois. Because of this, women may not know that severe pain or heavy bleeding aren't normal.

"The culture in a family could be, 'you just have to put up with it, it's part of being a woman,'" he explains. "But there are treatments available that can improve your health and your quality of life."

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Finding the Cause • It can be hard for doctors to tell menstrual problems apart. Blood tests can help detect hormonal changes. An imaging test called an ultrasound is very good at picking up fibroids.

But diagnosing endometriosis “is particularly tough,” says Dr. Stacey Missmer, an NIH-funded researcher at Michigan State University. It’s hard to see on imaging tests. No blood tests currently exist that can pick it up. The only way to know that a woman has it for sure is by a surgery in which a doctor looks through a small incision made in the abdomen.

This can lead to a long delay in diagnosis, “in part because no one wants to be quick to do surgery,” Missmer says. Sometimes, if endometriosis is suspected, doctors will prescribe medications first to see if they provide some relief.

Current Treatments • Many drugs used for fibroids, endometriosis, and other disorders that affect the menstrual cycle work by altering certain hormones. Birth control pills and other drugs can block these hormones.

Such treatments may work well for many women, Halvorson explains. “But they can also prevent a woman from getting pregnant,” she says. This can limit how long some women want to use them.

Researchers have developed approaches to treat fibroids that don’t involve major surgery. These often work well. But sometimes, fibroids can come back.

Some women with endometriosis get pain relief from surgery to remove the tissue that’s stuck to other organs. However, other women still have pain after this type of surgery.

For women who don’t get relief from drugs or less invasive procedures, a hysterectomy may be an option. This is surgery to remove the uterus and sometimes the ovaries. Women who undergo this surgery can no longer get pregnant.

Hysterectomy used to be much more widely used than it is now, says Al-Hendy. “But we have alternatives for hysterectomy now. So we tend to use it only when other options haven’t worked,” he explains. However, it doesn’t cure chronic pelvic pain for everyone.

Looking for Better Options • NIH-funded researchers continue to look into new ways to detect, treat, and prevent period problems.

“We need better, noninvasive ways to diagnose endometriosis,” Halvorson says.

Missmer is researching ways to create a test for endometriosis. “Many scientists are now exploring using blood, urine, and saliva,” she explains. “We’re looking for a signal that can determine whether a woman has endometriosis without having to do surgery.”

For both fibroids and endometriosis, “we need nonhormonal treatments,” Halvorson says. These



Wise Choices Menstrual Issues

Symptoms of fibroids, endometriosis, or other menstrual problems can include:

- Severe pain in the pelvis
- Very heavy bleeding during periods
- Pain during or after sex
- Feeling pressure in the pelvis
- Frequent need to urinate
- Bowel problems (diarrhea or constipation)

treatments are badly needed, she explains, because “some women can’t tolerate the side effects of hormonal treatments.” And hormonal treatments don’t work for women who want to get pregnant.

Al-Hendy is studying potential new fibroid treatments. His lab has found evidence that lack of vitamin D may play a role in fibroid growth. His team is now developing new drugs based on vitamin D and plans to test them to see if they can shrink fibroids.

Researchers also hope that by understanding the processes in the body that drive period problems, “we can eventually intervene early and prevent them,” Al-Hendy explains.

For now, he adds, there’s a lot to gain from women being aware of how common these disorders are, and of the options already available to treat them.

Missmer stresses the importance of speaking up. “If you were having pain every time you moved your elbow, you wouldn’t hesitate to go to the doctor and discuss it. So, there’s no reason why, if you’re having pain every time you have your period, that shouldn’t be discussed,” she says. ■

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Web Links

For more about menstrual issues and an extended Q&A, see “Links” in the online article: newsinhealth.nih.gov/2019/08/period-problems

Bulging Veins

What to Do About Varicose Veins

Are there bluish-purple or red lines popping out on your legs? Those could be varicose veins. Varicose veins are swollen, twisted veins that lie just underneath the skin's surface. They aren't just a cosmetic issue. If they aren't treated, they can also cause health problems.

"By the age of 50, nearly 40% of woman and 20% of men will have some significant leg vein problem," says Dr. Cheryl McDonald, a physician at NIH.

Varicose veins are caused by blood pooling in the veins. This makes them bulge out. Varicose veins most often occur in the legs, but they can appear other places too.

The veins farthest from your heart have the toughest job. They must move blood a long distance back to

your heart—and work against gravity to do it.

Your heart pumps oxygenated blood out through arteries to your organs and other tissues. Once your body uses the oxygen, the blood makes its way back to the heart through your veins. Then it's pumped to your lungs to pick up oxygen before being sent around your body again.

Veins have one-way valves that let blood flow forward. The valves then close to keep blood from leaking backward. When a valve doesn't function properly, blood can flow back down the vein. This can cause the blood to pool in the vein and keep it from going back to the heart. Blood pooling in the veins stretches them out—creating the swollen, twisted veins that can be seen and felt through the skin.

Blood can pool in both large and small veins. When this happens in small blood vessels, or capillaries, they're called spider veins. Spider veins usually appear on your face or legs. They're very thin—like a spider web—and can be red or blue. Spider veins don't usually bulge out like larger varicose veins. They can be a cosmetic issue, but don't normally cause bigger problems like varicose veins can.

"If not treated, larger varicose veins can become problematic," explains McDonald. They can cause symptoms like itching, achiness, heaviness, and swelling in the legs. If left untreated, the pressure inside the vein can further weaken the valve's functioning. That can lead to chronic changes in the skin and tissues, including open sores or ulcers and hard, thickened skin.



Varicose veins are a treatable medical condition. Your health care provider can usually diagnose them with a physical exam. They may also order an ultrasound or other tests to more fully evaluate the problem.

Treatment depends upon the severity of the vein problems. They range from lifestyle changes to medical procedures.

Losing weight can help combat varicose veins. Being overweight or obese adds pressure on the veins that can make it even harder for the blood to get back to the heart. Getting active and moving your muscles can help push blood back up towards the heart.

If lifestyle changes aren't enough, surgical methods may be used. Talk with your health care provider about your options. ■



Wise Choices

Lifestyle Changes For Varicose Veins

- **Get physical activity.** Move your legs to improve muscle tone. Get up and walk around every 30 minutes. When sitting, avoid crossing your legs.
- **Put your legs up.** Keep your legs raised when sitting, resting, or sleeping—above the level of your heart if you can.
- **Try to lose weight if you are overweight or obese.** Losing weight can improve blood flow and ease the pressure on your veins.
- **Avoid wearing tight clothes,** especially around your waist, upper thighs, and legs. The exception is when your doctor recommends compression stockings.
- **Wear compression stockings, if your doctor advises it.** These create gentle pressure up the leg and help reduce swelling.



Web Links

For more about varicose veins, see "Links" in the online article: newsinhealth.nih.gov/2019/08/bulging-veins





Health Capsules

For links to more information, please visit our website and see these stories online.

More Steps for Better Health

Walking is an easy way to exercise without needing a gym membership. It's a popular way to burn calories, and research shows that walking is good for your health. A new study asked how many steps a day can lead to health benefits.

Many watches and smartphones can count the steps you take in a day. These devices often suggest taking 10,000 steps each day. But that number isn't based on careful study.

Researchers looked at the daily

activity of 17,000 women averaging 72 years old. The women wore a device on their hip for seven days that tracked the number of steps they took each day.

The team tracked any deaths among the women over the next four years. More than 500 died during this time. The women who took about 4,400 steps per day were 41% less likely to die during the study than those who took 2,700 steps.

The risk of death continued to decrease with more steps until about

7,500 steps. Beyond that, the effect leveled off. The women who reached 10,000 steps each day had no added benefit.

"Taking 10,000 steps a day can sound daunting," says lead researcher Dr. I-Min Lee from Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School. "But we find that even a modest increase in steps taken is tied to significantly lower mortality in older women." ■

What is Psoriatic Arthritis?

Psoriasis is a disease that causes red and white scaly patches to appear on your skin. This happens because your body's defense system (immune system) attacks your own body by mistake.

If you have psoriasis, you may get another disease called psoriatic arthritis. Psoriatic arthritis causes your joints to swell up. The swelling occurs most in your fingers, toes, wrists, knees, ankles, and lower back.

This swelling might cause pain

in your joints and make it harder for you to bend them. The areas affected may also appear larger and turn red and warm.

You are more likely to get psoriatic arthritis if you have a family member with psoriasis or arthritis. Sometimes an infection might trigger your immune system to induce psoriatic arthritis.

There are drugs you can take to ease the pain and make the swelling go down. Other drugs can stop your immune system from

harming your joints.

If you have psoriatic arthritis, devices such as splints and braces can make movement easier. You may also want to try exercise, heat and cold therapies, and relaxation exercises. Talk with your health care provider. They can help you find out if you have psoriatic arthritis and what treatment methods are best for you.

To learn more, visit www.niams.nih.gov/health-topics/psoriatic-arthritis/advanced. ■



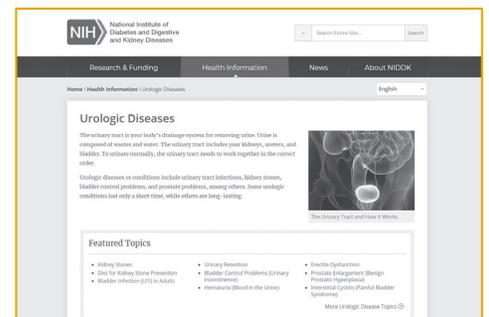
Featured Website

Urologic Diseases

www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/urologic-diseases

Your urinary system removes waste and extra fluid from your body. When this system isn't working properly, it can lead to health problems.

Urologic diseases and conditions include urinary tract infections, kidney stones, prostate problems, and more. Find out how urologic problems are detected and treated.



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