Menstrual Cramps

Etiology

There are two classifications of menstrual cramps:

Primary dysmenorrhea is the painful cramping of the uterus that happens during the first day or two of a menstrual period. The cramps are primarily located in the area just above the pubic bone and may radiate to the back and upper thighs. This is the type of cramping is not associated with any abnormal condition in the pelvis. Cramping can range from mild to severe and can last from several hours to several days.

Secondary dysmenorrhea is painful uterine contractions due to a clinically identifiable cause. These are not the normal menstrual-type cramps. There can be pain with sexual activity, and pelvic pain unrelated to menses (but also occurring with menses). Possible causes can be endometriosis or other pelvic diseases.

History

Your clinician will ask you about your menstrual history and the relationship of the timing and nature of your cramping to your menstrual cycle. You will also be asked what you have used in the past to reduce the pain of your cramping. Any symptoms associated with the cramping are important to discuss.

Physical Exam

Your blood pressure, pulse and temperature will be noted. An abdominal and vaginal examination may be done. A bimanual examination may be done to assess the uterus and ovaries.

Treatment for Primary Dysmenorrhea

Medications can be very effective in relieving pain.

Available over the counter:

Motrin/ibuprofen: 600-800 mg every six hours while cramping continues. This regimen may be started the day or two before your period is expected. This is the cheapest, safest treatment, and is very effective.

You need to use medications for 2-4 menstrual cycles to determine if they will benefit you. If they do not help, return to the Student Health Center to see your healthcare provider for further suggestions.

Non-medical alternatives:

- Using heat (hot water bottle, heating pads or hot baths)
- Taking a nap
- Exercise
- Increasing fluid intake
Treatment for Secondary Dysmenorrhea

Treatment will depend on what is causing your pain and cramping.

**When you should call the Student Health Center:**

- If sudden, severe pelvic pain occurs, with or without menstrual bleeding
- If your menstrual cramps become worse
- If pelvic pain seems unrelated to your menstrual cycle
- If you have cramps and a fever of 100 degrees or higher
- If cramps begin 5-7 days before your period starts or continue after your period stops
- If cramps do not respond to home treatment for 2-4 cycles, or if they interfere with your normal activities