

AM I NORMAL?

It's the question posed to thousands of doctors everyday, by worried women who suffer troublesome periods each month. Holistic GP Dr Shamim Daya reveals the medical and alternative approaches that can make a real difference

Menstrual problems are one of the four most common reasons why women of a reproductive age see their GP. Many cases are innocent, even though they may cause significant distress and discomfort, but sometimes they can be warning signs that something more serious is wrong. "Many young women seem to think that having erratic, irregular periods is no big deal, but they should never be ignored: they can have many long-term health implications, including the beginnings of osteoporosis, adrenal stress, weight issues, skin and mental health," explains Dr Daya, a GP and holistic practitioner at The Wholistic Medical Centre in London.

"The menstrual cycle is a very good indicator of a woman's overall state of health and balance on both a hormonal and physiological level," she adds. "Traditional Chinese Medical (TCM) practitioners pay great attention to medical history, obtaining information as to the consistency and colour of menstrual flow, the presence of clots, premenstrual symptoms especially pain, and/or the feelings of irritability. Very often, in TCM terms, 'liver chi stagnation' or 'liver heat' can explain many of these common symptoms and imbalances can be corrected very simply with specially formulated Chinese pills."

So, if your heavy flow leaves you feeling wiped out, PMS means you burst into tears at the smallest thing, or you never know when to expect your next period, you don't have to suffer any more. Read on for the lowdown on some of the most common complaints.

Menorrhagia or heavy periods

About a third of women describe their periods as heavy. The average blood loss during menstruation is typically about 40ml, but with menorrhagia the loss is 80ml or more. Women may have to use double sanitary protection – towels and tampons – and the heavy bleeding may prevent normal activities because of flooding through clothes, for example. In many cases no underlying cause can be found. If this is the case, it's important to keep an eye on iron levels as supplementation may be necessary.

The GP's verdict: It is important to see your doctor if you have persistent symptoms of heavy periods. He or she can organise a pelvic scan to exclude the presence of fibroids or uterine polyps as well as a blood test to check your iron levels. You may also be prescribed a course of Norethisterone, which may help to stop the bleeding.

Dr Daya's holistic approach: Once medical tests and investigations have ruled out any underlying causes, there are some diet and lifestyle approaches you can take to help yourself. It's a good idea to consult with a herbalist who will make up a special herbal formula to balance your hormones. The Traditional Chinese Medical approach is also very effective. TCM views menstruation as the body's way of releasing excess 'heat' and eliminating toxins. The presence of fibroids often implies 'congestion' and 'stagnation' in the circulatory and lymphatic systems. It may also help to check precisely which nutrients are needed to balance the hormone pathway. These simple approaches should be tried first before considering the use of natural progesterone to correct an oestrogen dominant state.

Dysmenorrhoea or painful periods

A certain amount of discomfort around the time of ovulation and menstruation is very common, affecting 40–70 per cent of women of reproductive age. For about one in 10 women the pain and discomfort is bad enough to interfere with their daily lives. It has been proposed that it's related to the movements of the womb and the hormones and chemicals that circulate around the body at that time of the month.

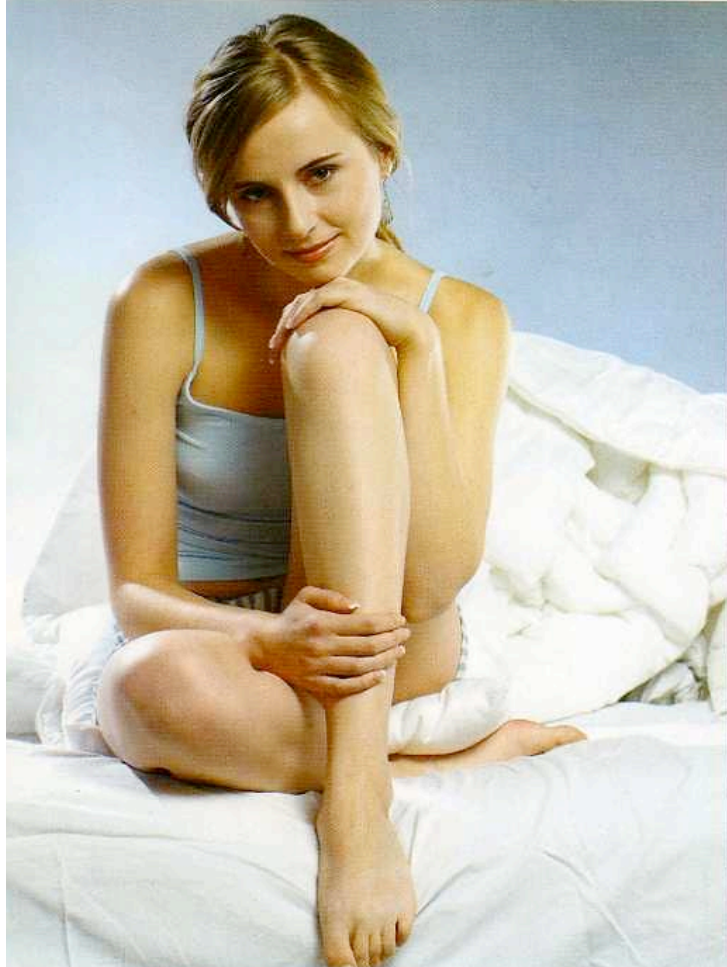
The GP's verdict: If these symptoms persist, it is important to consult with your doctor to routine investigations to exclude conditions like endometriosis. Painkillers, such as ibuprofen, are often prescribed in the first instance.

Dr Daya's holistic approach: A more natural approach would include improving dietary and lifestyle habits. Thereafter, it would help to take some basic nutritional supplements including omega-3 oils, magnesium, vitamin B complex and zinc. Magnets have also been found to be useful in relieving painful periods. In TCM, painful periods usually imply 'liver chi stagnation' or a blockage in the natural flow of energy and can be easily corrected by addressing the liver imbalances. In older women it may be important to consider natural progesterone in the second half of their cycle.

Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS)

This consists of a variety of symptoms that come on anytime from ovulation to the onset of menstruation. These include breast tenderness, irritability, depression, headaches, fluid retention, carbohydrate cravings and bloating. Many women experience physical and mood changes around the time of their period, but for some it can be a particularly difficult time. Women aged 30–45 often experience the most severe PMS.

The GP's verdict: Since PMS tends to occur in the second half of the cycle, it implies an imbalance in hormones, especially progesterone. The contraceptive pill may be prescribed to balance the hormones.



Managing problem periods: how to help yourself

Women can help themselves with many menstrual problems by improving their diet, taking regular exercise and supplementing with certain basic vitamins and minerals, including essential fatty acids, advises Dr Daya. Here's some other things to consider:

- **Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)** is very common in young women and causes various menstrual irregularities. This condition is very often related to dietary issues, with blood sugar fluctuations creating hormonal imbalances. A diet that is balanced with protein, fibre and fat is what we should all be aiming for. Many vegetarians become depleted in blood and iron reserves and do not have very stable blood sugar patterns from their eating habits.
- With monthly blood loss, it is inevitable that many women may become iron deficient so it is important to have your iron levels checked.
- On the whole, women should avoid taking the contraceptive pill for many reasons, including that it merely masks their main hormonal state which should and can be dealt with in a more natural way, whether that be with dietary changes, TCM, nutritional supplements and lifestyle changes, including exercise and stress management.
- Endometriosis and fibroids are best treated in a natural holistic way, avoiding surgical intervention as much as possible. It may require supervised holistic treatment plans covering different perspectives at the same time. In TCM terms, these conditions are often put down to a state of stagnation and congestion, which is another way of describing a person who is toxic with waste accumulation and a sluggish lymphatic system. In addition to basic dietary and lifestyle changes, electro-lymphatic therapy is an excellent way to kick start the lymphatic and circulatory system and disperse areas of congestion.
- Certain tests you may want to request include: pelvic scan to determine the presence of fibroids or polycystic ovaries; cervical smear; bone density scan to screen for osteoporosis; blood tests to check for iron and thyroid function; and thermal imaging to screen for breast problems. A laparoscopy may also be required to determine the presence of endometriosis.

Dr Daya's holistic approach: In younger women, such hormonal imbalances should be easily correctable through a healthy diet and regular exercise regime. It would be helpful to consult with a nutritionist to help with dietary advice as well as suggestions on what key nutrients to take. There is a multivitamin called Bio-PMT (£19.15, Thorne Research) which is worth trying in addition to omega 3+6 oils.

It may also help to consult with a herbalist who will make up a formula of herbs to balance your hormone levels.

Oligomenorrhoea or irregular, infrequent periods

In this case menstruation can occur anywhere between every six weeks and six months. Many of the causes are the same as those for amenorrhoea. A common cause is a condition called polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS).

The GP's verdict: This signifies hormone imbalances and if persistent should be discussed with your doctor. Routine investigations should include blood tests to check your hormone levels as well as a pelvic scan to exclude polycystic ovaries. You may be prescribed one of the contraceptive pills to help establish a regular menstrual pattern.

Dr Daya's holistic approach: A complementary practitioner should consider emotional, biochemical and biomechanical factors as any of these can contribute to having irregular periods. Applied kinesiology is very effective at checking and correcting each of these. Essential nutrients, such as activated vitamin B6, magnesium, zinc and omega 3+6 oils, are commonly recommended. Herbs such as Vitex agnus castus are often helpful, as are homeopathic female balance drops. PCOS is best treated initially by improving dietary habits, especially to include more protein and fibre, as well as including a regular exercise programme. If you are vegetarian it is important to get professional advice on good sources of protein, such as Vianesse Lactalbumin protein powder.

Further information

Dr Shamim Daya BM DRCOG has 25 years clinical experience as a GP and holistic practitioner, focusing on women's health. She combines nutrition, herbal medicine and advanced biochemical testing to reach the source of persisting symptoms. Contact The Wholistic Medical Centre on 020 7580 7537 or go to wholisticmedical.co.uk

