

How can PMS be managed?

Psycho-Social ways of managing your PMS.

Many women find that their PMS symptoms improve with changes to their diet, increasing exercise and reducing stress.

Diet: Stabilising blood sugar levels might help prevent food cravings, as well as the mood swings often associated with PMS, so eat regular, well balanced meals. Reducing your caffeine intake might help tackle insomnia and irritability and drinking plenty of water will reduce dehydration.

De-stress: Stress exacerbates anxiety, depression and low mood, and can also disturb sleep patterns, leading to insomnia. Regularly take some time out to relax, perhaps by listening to music, doing something creative, going for a walk, or even taking a nap. Some women find that aromatherapy oils can aid relaxation – try adding lavender or sage oil to your bathwater.

Exercise: Aerobic exercise, such as running, jogging, cycling or swimming, releases endorphins, which helps tackle the anxiety and/or low mood that often characterises PMS. Yoga and meditation are also good ways to reduce stress levels.

Dietary supplements eg vitamin B6, vitamin E, calcium, magnesium: Evidence on the efficacy of dietary supplements in the treatment of PMS has thus far been inconclusive, but some women find that increasing their intake of the vitamins and minerals listed has helped alleviate the symptoms of PMS. These supplements are available over the counter in pharmacies; you are strongly advised to check maximum recommended daily doses and potential interactions with drugs that you are already taking (including The Pill) with a pharmacist or doctor.

Evening primrose oil: Evening primrose oil is very effective in relieving premenstrual breast pain in some women. There are no major reported side effects, but occasionally women experience nausea, headaches and indigestion. Taking the capsules with or after food can lessen these effects. Some studies have suggested that EPO is no more effective than a placebo. Evening primrose oil is available in capsule form from pharmacies; it may also be prescribed by a doctor for some conditions.

Medical ways of managing your PMS

However, some women find that they prefer to manage their PMS by taking drugs on prescription after consultation with a doctor.

Contraceptive Pill:

The Pill is prescribed for some women as a treatment for the symptoms of PMS, as some types of the Pill can cause lighter periods and stabilise hormone levels in the body. However, not all women experience an improvement in symptoms and some women see their symptoms exacerbated. Research suggests that the progesterone-only pill is more successful in managing PMS than the combined pill.

Some women experience side effects including nausea, breast tenderness, bleeding between periods and mood changes, although these usually disappear within three months. There is also some evidence which suggests that the combined pill increases slightly the risk of breast cancer, although studies have also suggested that the risk of ovarian and cervical cancer is slightly reduced. The pill is available free from all family planning clinics and GP surgeries; however, if you are intending to use the pill as a treatment for the symptoms of PMS, you are strongly advised to consult your doctor.

Progesterone and Oestrogen Therapy:

Some studies suggest that pre-menstrual symptoms are triggered by hormonal changes with ovulation. Different forms of hormone therapy have been successful at alleviating these symptoms by regulating these changes. Although the British Medical Association does not officially recommend their use in the treatment of PMS, progesterone and oestrogen therapies are often prescribed by doctors. Progesterone is available in different forms (both natural and synthetic) and can be taken in different ways. Some women have found it necessary to manage their symptoms with a combination that prevents menstruation whilst other women have found relief in controlling the extent of hormonal change taking place during their cycle. There are many different options and you will need to work with your doctor to find out whether there is a hormonal therapy that could work for you.

Anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medication

For some women depression and anxiety can be the most significant pre-menstrual symptoms. There are a variety of drugs that have been found to significantly alleviate pre-menstrual symptoms but there are also concerns about the possible side effects of these treatments, which can vary from person to person and from drug to drug. These drugs are only available on prescription and should only be taken after consulting a doctor on the possible benefits and side effects.

The drugs below are listed as possible ways of managing PMS by the NHS, but are generally not considered as a first resort. The purpose of this leaflet is to give information on the choices available and therefore we list them here as further options.

Bromocriptine: Bromocriptine blocks release of a hormone called prolactin from the pituitary gland. Prolactin affects the menstrual cycle, so bromocriptine is sometimes used to treat some of the symptoms of PMS, particularly breast tenderness. This medicine may cause some people to become drowsy, dizzy, or less alert than they are normally; it is not advisable to drink alcohol when taking this medication

Danazol: Danazol is a synthetic form of the male hormone testosterone; it can be used to treat the symptoms of PMS because it suppresses the production of oestrogen. However, it can cause increase in male characteristics such as more body hair, decreased breast size and a lowering of the voice, which may be permanent. For this reason, it tends to be used only in severe cases of PMS.

Norethisterone: This hormone sustains the lining of the uterus, and therefore delays a period. Although it will not necessarily alleviate the symptoms of PMS (and indeed can make them worse), it is used by some women on a short term basis to delay menstruation, for example to avoid clashing with exams or a holiday. It is only available on prescription.

What is PMS?

PMS stands for Pre-Menstrual Syndrome. The term covers a range of symptoms experienced by women 2-14 days before a period starts.

It is not necessary to have all the symptoms below to experience PMS. Changes in diet, changes in environment (like starting university!) and altering stress levels can also affect menstruation and PMS throughout your lifetime.

They can be psychological, physical and/or behavioural, but they may include some of the following:

- Depression or low mood, often mixed with feeling vulnerable and a need for reassurance
- Loss of energy and motivation
- Agitation and restlessness, and/or difficulty of concentration
- Irrational thoughts, sometimes accompanied by irritability/ anger
- Poor quality of sleep, or an excessive desire to sleep
- Loss of sex drive
- Breast tenderness
- Bloating
- Abdominal cramps
- Water retention
- Headaches and/or migraine
- Changes in appetite, sometimes accompanied by cravings for certain types of food

PMS is clinically diagnosed when these symptoms become so severe that they affect a woman's ability to go about her everyday life. You might find it useful to keep a diary of symptoms and many doctors will ask you to do this before offering any 'clinical' diagnosis.

Further Information

This leaflet has been produced to offer women more information about ways that they can manage their own PMS. All women experience PMS in different ways and to different extents and therefore manage their symptoms in different ways. For more information on PMS please consider the suggestions below.

- Your college nurse and/or GP will be able to offer advice on possible treatment, particularly medical treatment

- The National Association Premenstrual Syndrome (NAPS)'s website can be found at www.pms.org.uk. It contains lots of independent information about the possible treatment options, including a useful FAQ section.

- NAPS also produces guides to managing PMS through medication, through diet, and through complementary therapies. You can obtain these by calling their helpline on 0870 777 2178, or by emailing contact@pms.org.uk

- The national mental health charity, MIND, produces an excellent booklet on the mental health aspects of PMS. It is available for download from this website: www.mind.org.uk/Information/Booklets/Understanding/Understanding+premenstrual+syndrome.htm

- If you feel that PMS is affecting your studies, contact your tutor. Alternatively, you can speak to a college women's or welfare officer or the CUSU Women's Officer on womens@cusu.cam.ac.uk.

Pre Menstrual Syndrome

A Non-Directional Information Leaflet



WOMEN'S UNION 