

Menstrual Cramps (Dysmenorrhea)



Overview

Menstrual cramps are abdominal cramps that can occur monthly just before and during a woman's menstrual period. Usually they do not indicate a problem. However, sometimes cramps can be a symptom of a disorder.

Causes

Menstrual cramps are caused by contractions of the uterus. During menstruation, the uterus contracts forcibly and frequently as it sheds and expels its interior lining. Most menstrual cramps result from this type of contraction. But cramps can be more intense and painful for women who have endometriosis, uterine polyps or fibroids, or sexually transmitted diseases. Sometimes, pregnant women can also experience painful cramping.

Symptoms

Symptoms of menstrual cramps may include a dull, throbbing or cramping pain in the lower abdomen. This pain may radiate through the back, hips and legs. Pain may range from mildly uncomfortable to severe. Some women may also complain of nausea and vomiting, dizziness, sweating and loose stools.

Treatment

For many women, menstrual cramps last only a short time and require no treatment. A physician should evaluate cases of severe or unusual cramps, especially cramps experienced by older women. For women who experience painful cramps or cramps that disrupt normal activities, treatment options may include nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medication or birth control hormones that prevent ovulation. Cramps that are caused by a medical condition may resolve only after the underlying condition is treated.

