

PMS: A rollercoaster ride?

Premenstrual syndrome (PMS) is a real medical condition that affects about 40% of women of reproductive age. Over half of the women who suffer from PMS have symptoms serious enough to affect their lives. Common symptoms of PMS include breast tenderness, bloating, food cravings, irritability, and mood swings which range in severity from mild to severe and generally occur 1-14 days before the period. The types of PMS symptoms can be divided into four categories: PMS-A: nervous tension, mood swings, irritability, anxiety, PMS-C: headache, cravings for sweets, increased appetite, heart pounding, fatigue, dizziness or fainting, PMS-D: depression, forgetfulness, crying, confusion, insomnia, and PMS-H: weight gain, swelling of extremities, breast tenderness, abdominal bloating. Other symptoms of PMS include acne and oily skin.

The cause of PMS varies for each individual woman. There may be an excess of estrogen in the body, a deficiency of progesterone, a deficiency of serotonin or endorphins, an under-active thyroid, or deficiencies of certain vitamins and minerals.

There are many dietary and nutritional options for treating PMS. Caffeine should be avoided especially if anxiety and depression or breast tenderness and fibrocystic breast disease are the major PMS symptoms. Caffeine is found in coffee, black tea, chocolate, and sodas. Sugar should also be reduced, since it is associated with higher estrogen levels and higher frequency of PMS. Read food labels carefully since sugar can appear as sucrose, glucose, maltose, fructose, or corn syrup. Reducing salt intake and increasing potassium intake will help reduce symptoms of PMS-H (water retention, abdominal bloating, weight gain) since excess salt consumption stresses the kidney's ability to maintain proper fluid volume. Salt (as sodium) is found in most processed foods. Potassium is found in fresh fruits (especially bananas), vegetables (especially avocados), whole grains, and beans.

Many PMS symptoms are caused by deficiencies of the nutrients needed for normal hormone regulation. Vitamin B6 is prescribed to help with moods, cravings, and energy. Calcium citrate and magnesium citrate help reduce menstrual cramps, cravings for chocolate and symptoms of anxiety. One tablespoon of fresh flax oil a day helps reduce the cravings for unhealthy fats as well as helps regulate the balance of estrogens and progesterone hormones in the body. There are many herbs, such as Vitex and Dong Quai that help balance the hormone balance in the body and benefit PMS.

Lowering stress levels is essential in reducing PMS symptoms. When the body is over-taxed, the adrenal glands expend all their energy manufacturing corticosteroids (our stress hormone). This depletes the adrenal glands of the energy necessary to produce enough progesterone. This leads to an imbalance of hormones and PMS symptoms. Stress reduction techniques such as deep breathing, yoga, meditation and acupuncture and homeopathy can be effective in reducing stress and restoring the body to optimal hormone balance.