

Pre-menstrual tension (also known as pre-menstrual syndrome or PMS) can affect any woman who is menstruating. It is common, affecting approximately half of women in their late 40's. Symptoms are either mood changes, headaches, bloatedness or a combination of any of these occurring before a period. Generally the symptoms are relieved by menstruation.

### **Cause**

There is no known cause for it. Doctors do not know why some women get severe symptoms and others do not. It is known that women who tend to get headaches, bloatedness or mood changes are likely to be effected by pre-menstrual conditions. In other words, if your personality tends to be anxious or irritable then this can be worse before a period.

### **Treatment**

Many women put up with pre-menstrual tension but others chose to try various treatments. Generally speaking the treatments can be divided to those taken all the time, hormones taken to manipulate the menstrual cycle or specific treatments.

### **Tablets taken all the time**

There has been a lot of interest in Evening Primrose Oil. Large doses are thought to supplement the bodies natural fatty acids and there are anecdotes to suggest they can be useful.

Critical scientific evaluation of Evening Primrose Oil suggested that the effect is limited and many women are disappointed by the results. However they are popular. This is probably because they are relatively safe but they are not cheap and the capsules have a high calorific value (ie fatening).

Vitamin B6 is also popular. Again there is no good scientific evidence to suggest it works but some women believe it helps. Again it is safe and is worth trying.

### **Homeopathy, acupuncture, herbal medicine**

There is no good evidence that homeopathy, acupuncture or herbal medicine make any difference to the condition. Homeopathy and acupuncture are safe and many people try them.

Herbal medicines are promoted for many unremitting conditions. Provided unrealistic

exceptions are not raised, little harm is likely to result from trying one of the variety of preparations. Techniques relying on the elimination of mythical toxins from the body are also popular. As PMS is not due to any known toxin this method of alternative therapy has no scientific merit. However, conventional medicine is not omnipotent, does not have all the answers.

Dietary changes work for a limited number of conditions and eating healthily can improve a feeling of well-being. It is not logical to believe that dietary changes affect PMS but it does little harm to try.

### **Specific tablets for bloatedness**

Many women get bloated premenstrually. This is due to the hormone called progesterone. Progesterone is naturally secreted by the ovary before a period and is the same hormone produced in pregnancy. Therefore it is not surprising that women get swollen legs, tender breasts or puffy fingers before a period. One popular treatment is to take water tablets just before a period. These can be prescribed by your doctor or you can buy natural water tablets from any chemist. They work by moving the water from your skin to your kidneys and bladder but the major problem is that you pass urine frequently. For this reason it is best to take one tablet first thing in the morning.

### **Tablets for breast tenderness**

Tablets given to pregnant women to stop milk production also help pre-menstrual breast tenderness. There are two different types of treatment. One treatment specifically interacts with the natural hormones that excrete milk production. This treatment is safe but can cause headaches. A second type of hormone tablet is a low dose of male hormone. This prevents breast changes such as swelling and tenderness but the treatment has to be taken continuously and can have side effects. Side effects are rare with low doses but can include skin changes, unwanted hair and weight gain.

### **Specific tablets for mood changes**

Women often experience pre-menstrual mood changes such as irritability, tension, anxiety, anger and spontaneous weepiness. Mood changes are commoner in women who have a natural tendency to be depressed or anxious. American gynaecologists are very enthusiastic

about treating anxiety and depression with anti-anxiety or anti-depressant drugs. This is not popular in Britain because of the side effects, but one new anti-depressant drug called Prozac, has been used in America for pre-menstrual syndrome. This was designed as an anti-depressant but early trials with very low doses suggests that it was effective for pre-menstrual syndrome. Research suggests that the dose needed for pre-menstrual tension is lower than the dose required to treat depression.

### **Hormones**

It is thought that women develop pre-menstrual symptoms because of menstrual cycle hormone changes. The influence of hormones on moods, bloatedness and headaches is well known and it is not surprising that doctors have used different hormone techniques to try to treat pre-menstrual syndrome. The most popular is the oral contraceptive pill. It works by providing the natural female hormones in consistent and regular amounts. This means that the ovaries do not need to produce hormones and you do not experience the natural fluctuations associated with pre-menstrual syndrome. The other advantage of the pill is that it produces regular and predictable menstruation. Traditionally the pill is taken for 21 days leaving you with a period every four weeks. However there is no reason why you cannot take two, three or even four packets of the pill without a break. The obvious advantage of this is that you only have a period every 2-3 months and you only get pre-menstrual syndrome 4-6 times a year. A lot of women experiment with this and the only way to find out if it suits you is to try it. There may be other reasons why you may not want to take the pill but it is a popular option worth considering.

Another popular option is a very low dose androgen hormone called Danazol. This suppresses the natural cyclical variation in female hormones and is of undoubted value in the treatment of pre-menstrual tension. However the hormone can have side effects. The most significant is probable slight weight gain. Although this does not occur in every woman the thought of weight gain is usually enough to inhibit most women from taking it.

There is also a hormone you can take which blocks your natural hormones. The disadvantage of this is that it mimics the side effects of the menopause. It is a useful test to see if your mood changes are due to hormone variations. It also shows what your life would be like when you are in the menopause or if you had your ovaries removed.

### **Surgery**

There are rare occasions when a woman's pre-menstrual tension is so bad that the only way to cure it is to remove the ovaries. This certainly works as it removes the natural changes of female hormones but it is a radical procedure. In the olden days the ovaries had to be removed by opening the abdomen. This is no longer necessary as it can be dealt with telescope surgical (key hole) techniques and therefore the time stay in hospital is very similar to that of a sterilisation procedure.

However it is a major undertaking and not to be considered lightly.

### **Summary**

Pre-menstrual syndrome is common and it can be a debilitating condition effecting women for a significant proportion of their menstrual cycle. It resolves spontaneously with the menopause but most women have to wait until they are about 50 for this natural cure. There are various agents available but none are perfect. Most women try simple measures such as homeopathy, Vitamin B6 and Evening Primrose Oil first and then have the option of Prozac for mood changes and water tablets for bloatedness. Some women use hormones and the most common and popular is the oral contraceptive pill. No one treatment is perfect for every woman and all you can do is experiment until you find a treatment that suits you with the side effects you find tolerable.

*(Johnson. 1998)*