

What are period pains?

Many women experience period pains. Pains can come before, during or after a period. They can be felt in the lower part of the abdomen or deep in the pelvis.

Where can the pain come from?

The structures in the lower part of the abdomen or pelvis include:

- bowel,
- ligaments,
- and gynaecological organs (uterus - womb, tubes and ovaries).

The commonest cause of period pains coming from the bowel is irritable bowel disease. Occasionally women get ligament pain before a period and this is due to the hormonal effect of softening the ligaments.

The other causes of pain come from the gynaecological organs. These include pain from the process of menstruation, pain from uterine contractions, pain from glands that are blocked in the womb (known to doctors as adenomyosis), pain from internal menstruation (known to doctors as endometriosis) and pain from congested flow of blood from the ovaries (known as pelvic congestion syndrome). None of the causes of painful periods are serious. Painful periods have been intensive studied and none of the causes include cancer or cancer related illnesses. In other words period pains are not related to cancer. Although they may not damage your health they can still be very uncomfortable. If you have pain with your periods and premenstrual tension the suffering can be multiplied. It is not surprising that many women find irritability worse if they are in pain. If you have pain and are depressed before your period it is not surprising that the pain is harder to cope with.

The cause of periods pains

The gynaecologist can often have a good guess at the cause of your pain by listening to your story, examining the womb and findings out where the tender areas are. Sometimes it

is difficult to be certain what the cause of the pain is. The only test that can give a definitive answer is an examination where doctors look inside your tummy (laparoscopy, sigmoidoscopy / colonoscopy).

Pain from pelvic inflammation

Some women have an inflamed pelvis that causes considerable discomfort. The pain is often worse during menstruation. It is also made worse by movement. Intercourse is one very common cause of moving the womb. Pain can be associated with scarring around the tubes and organs can stick together (adhere together hence the term adhesions).

The pain can be quite variable but many women find that they are previous well but then have an episode of severe pain that leaves them with period pains. They tend to get better with time although there can be episodes of severe discomfort.

Uterine spasms

(known as spasmodic dysmenorrhoea)

Some women get uterine cramps with their periods. Women get pain because the uterus tries to contract to expel its contents and this produces cramp like pain. This is common in girls having periods for the first time.

Blocked glands in the uterus

(known to doctors as adenomyosis)

As the years go by glands in the uterus can get blocked. Every month the lining of the uterus grows and these glands also grow. However, at the time of menstruation the uterus contracts to expel its contents but it squeezes on the glands which can be tender. This can produce considerable discomfort. The uterus is often tender and there is pain with intercourse.

Endometriosis

Endometriosis is a condition when the lining of the womb is also found in the tummy. It is very common and doctors do not know why some women never have any problems from it but others get considerable pain.

The best way to imagine endometriosis is to remember that the lining of the womb grows then sheds every month and is expelled by the womb. If the lining of the womb is inside of the tummy it cannot be expelled. However, there are numerous cells whose special job is to mop up any menstrual shedding. The cells can cause inflammation. This inflammation causes pain and tenderness.

Pelvic congestion syndrome

Some women get pain from their ovaries. It is common to get pain during ovulation and when the egg is released. Some women also get pain from the ovaries just before a period. This is probably because the ovary is trying to feed the egg and requires an additional blood supply. The veins can become quite congested and tender.

Irritable bowel disease

Irritable bowel disease is extremely common. Bowel contractions or spasms cause it. It is often associated with bloatedness, irregular bowel habit, generalised lower abdominal tenderness and the pain may be worse during times of anxiety. It is often worse during a period because of the effect of the female hormones of the way the bowel moves.

Treatment

Treatment depends on the cause. The only treatment for inflammatory bowel disease involves manipulating the diet. Antispasm agents and hormones have been used but the most important thing is to avoid constipation. Treatment of gynaecological conditions involves finding the cause, removing it if necessary or minimising or preventing periods with hormonal treatment.

Identifying the cause of pelvic pain

Sometimes it can be difficult to work out the nature of pelvic pain and this can be confirmed by an internal examination by a gynaecologist. However, the pain may be difficult to pin down even after an examination. Unfortunately there are no simple tests and the only way to make the diagnosis is to perform an exploratory operation using a telescope inside the tummy or womb. This is can be uncomfortable and most people prefer to have an anaesthetic.

The telescope enables the surgeon to look at the lining of the womb, tubes, ovaries, appendix and other nearby organs. An alternative approach is to consider what the most likely diagnosis is. If the diagnosis is correct then appropriate treatment for that condition should help the pain. If the treatment does not work the next most likely diagnosis should be considered and treated. Again if the treatment works nothing else needs to be done. The disadvantage of this approach is that it involves trial and error. The advantage is that it would save you having an anaesthetic and having to come up to the hospital for tests. As all the treatments are safe many people opt for this approach.