



Pre-menstrual Syndrome - Can Diet Help?



Not all women who suffer from Pre-menstrual Syndrome (and it affects 95% of women in some way) will need medical treatment. Many women will find they can get relief from some of their symptoms by trying the following dietary guidelines.



Fluctuating hormone levels through the menstrual cycle have an effect on the production of neurotransmitters (particularly serotonin) in the brain (1&2). When these levels drop premenstrually women experience a variety of symptoms: mood swings, irritability, increased appetite or carbohydrate cravings, breast tenderness, backache, headaches, and bloating are just a few of the more

common ones. The dietary approach to finding relief from some of these symptoms is based mainly on maximising serotonin production.

An overall healthy diet, based on lower fat intakes, lower sugar intakes, choosing more unrefined carbohydrate foods, and including fruit & vegetables in good amounts is recommended. Reducing caffeine and taking alcohol in sensible amounts can help too. It may take about 4 months for any benefits from altering diet to be noticed, so try to be patient.

To help prevent wide fluctuations in blood sugar levels, aim to eat:

1. regular meals and snacks containing starchy carbohydrate. Avoid leaving longer than about 3 hours without something to eat - just a piece of fruit will be sufficient between meals to top up the blood sugar slowly and prevent you from getting too hungry between meals
2. try to reduce the quantity of high sugar, highly processed carbohydrate foods you eat eg, sweets, sweet biscuits & cakes, sugary drinks



Eating more often should not cause you to put on weight, if you choose healthy snacks. A piece of fruit, eg, a small banana, is a low fat starchy snack which could be eaten between meals and only 90 calories.

Compare this to 2-3 cream biscuits amounting to over 200 calories, or a regular chocolate bar at 350 calories.

Starchy high fibre carbohydrates to include at your meals or as your snacks:-

Wholegrain breakfast cereals like porridge, wheatflakes, branflakes, Shredded wheat or mueslis. Wholemeal or granary bread/ rolls/ toast/ crackers/ pittas or muffins. Brown rice, Basmati rice, pasta, pasta or rice salads (low fat dressings) jacket potatoes, sweet potatoes, new potatoes. Fruit and vegetables generally, and nuts in small amounts.

A regular starchy intake, but low sugar intake, can help to stave off carbohydrate cravings.



If you are trying to lose weight, follow a sensible low fat plan, which does not limit carbohydrate foods too much, and is preferably low GI (Glycaemic Index) - see website or Food Fact Sheet on GI. Reducing your fat intake, whilst raising the starchy carbohydrate will prevent you from gaining weight. Keep an eye on your portions, if trying to watch your weight.

To help combat fluid retention:

Try to reduce your salt intake, (rather than your fluid intake) particularly at the pre-menstrual time. Around 75% of salt we eat is hidden in our foods, those having the highest amounts include: take-away and processed foods, tinned soups, tinned vegetables, salted meats (bacon, ham, corned beef), savoury snacks (crisps etc) and ready meals.

For general health, particularly heart health, it is a good idea to reduce salt in the diet generally. See Food Fact Sheet on Salt & Health for more information.

Reduce caffeine:

Some studies have suggested that consumption of caffeine is strongly related to PMS symptoms whereas others suggest less of a relationship (3). It might be worth trying to reduce caffeine over a 3-4 month period and see if this does improve symptoms; try decaffeinated drinks, herbal drinks, more water and less cola and chocolate.

Do Supplements help reduce the common symptoms of PMS?

Dietary supplementation may be of value in reducing the symptoms of PMS but the diet needs to be healthier first.



Those that in recent trials have been shown to be the most beneficial are:

Magnesium

Many women in the UK have low intakes of this mineral (6). Particularly helpful for the mood (4) symptoms or pre-menstrual migraine, doses of around 200-250mg a day have been found to be beneficial (4,5). Doses higher than 350-400 may cause diarrhoea.

Calcium

Women who have better dietary intakes of calcium (over 1200mg) have been found to have less overall symptoms (7). As calcium is also good for bone health, aim for an intake of 1200-1500mg from diet or from diet & supplements together, if diet alone is not achieving this level. The dairy council has lists of calcium values of common foods (see website).

Vitamin B6*

This was a very popular supplement in the 70s and 80s for the relief of mood symptoms with its involvement in the serotonin pathway, however recent trials have shown mixed results. One positive trial used a supplement of 50mg B6 together with 200mg of magnesium, which helped with emotional symptoms and also reduced migraines (8). Supplements above 100mg of B6 are not recommended as high doses may be toxic (causing symptoms relating to nerves (9)).

Vitamin E*

This vitamin regulates prostaglandin synthesis and a recent trial including a daily supplement of 400iu (10ug) vitamin E (the level found in many one-a-day multivitamin supplements) showed some improvements in symptoms (especially breast pain). More is not beneficial.

Isoflavones*

Two recent trials, one using a supplement of around 70mg/day did help to reduce several premenstrual symptoms in a group of women (breast tenderness, cramps and swelling) (11 &12).

Evening Primrose Oil*

This is also needed for prostaglandin synthesis, but although it has been favoured in the past, more recent trials have not demonstrated huge benefits in the relief of PMS symptoms (13). It may have a small effect, and some women may wish to try it for a few months.

* if these supplements show no real improvement after 3-4 months, discontinue their use.

For further help, and useful websites:

www.bda.uk.com



The British Dietetic Association Food Fact Sheets - click on "Latest Food Facts" and download food information sheets

www.glycaemicindex.com



Links to information about GI - for information on Glycaemic Index of foods

www.bdaweightwise.com



BDA Weight Wise - for useful information on healthy eating and weight control

www.nationalobesityforum.org.uk



National Obesity Forum - for general healthy eating information

www.milk.co.uk



The Dairy Council - for information on milk, calcium and health