

What's making your periods extra-painful

It could be a condition called endometriosis, which leads to pain, inflammation and scarring in the pelvis, says gynaecologist Dr Hong Sze Ching



Consult your doctor if you have severe menstrual cramps regularly, before and during your period. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Some women have painful period cramps but for others, the pain may be much more severe and affect the whole pelvic area. This could be caused by a condition called endometriosis.

Endometriosis occurs when tissue similar to the inner lining of the womb is found outside it. Common sites include ovaries (where it may cause endometriotic or "chocolate" cysts), fallopian tubes, on the surface of the womb, in the peritoneum (the lining of the pelvis and abdomen), and in the area between the vagina and the rectum.

When the endometrial tissue is present in the muscular wall of the womb, it is called adenomyosis.

"It is a common condition, affecting around one in 10 women, usually during their reproductive years. There is also a higher risk if one's mother or sister has it," says Dr Hong Sze Ching, a consultant in Obstetrics & Gynaecology at Mount Alvernia Hospital.

She shares more about the condition, its symptoms and treatment methods.

Q What causes endometriosis and how is it diagnosed?

The exact cause is unknown. Possible causes include retrograde menstruation, genetic factors and immune system problems, among others.

It is a hormone-dependent condition where hormonal changes during a woman's period causes the endometrial-like tissue located outside the womb to bleed. This can cause pain, inflammation and scarring, and can possibly damage your pelvic organs.

The condition is difficult to diagnose as symptoms vary in individuals. Some women may have no obvious symptoms while others may have symptoms similar to other conditions such as irritable bowel syndrome or pelvic inflammatory disease.

To check for endometriosis, there are several tests such as a pelvic examination, pelvic ultrasound scan, or laparoscopy, a minimally invasive procedure to look at your pelvis.

Your doctor may also check for CA125, a blood protein which is a tumour marker for certain gynaecological cancers, but is also raised in women who have endometriosis.

Q How can I tell if I have period pain or if it is something more serious?

A common symptom of endometriosis includes pain that occurs in a certain pattern, becoming worse before and during your period.

Your period may be irregular or heavy if you also have adenomyosis. It can cause pain during or after sex and can also lead to fertility problems. You may also experience pain in your bowels or bladder.

Q What are some treatment methods for endometriosis?

Treatment depends on the extent of the disease, severity of symptoms, and whether a woman desires fertility. Treatment involves medication, surgery, or both.

Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) may be prescribed to relieve pain.

There are hormone treatments to reduce or halt ovulation, such as progestogen tablets, hormonal intrauterine contraceptive devices or a hormonal injection called GnRHa (gonadotropin-releasing hormone agonists).

Surgery can be done to remove areas where there are endometriotic tissue deposits or endometriotic cysts.



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