



Menstrual periods - heavy, prolonged, or painful

For most women, menstrual periods occur every 24 to 34 days and last about 4 days. The typical woman uses 3-6 sanitary pads or tampons in 24 hours.

If you soak through a pad or tampon every hour for 6 hours, this is considered a very heavy period. Some women have such heavy periods that it is impossible to keep up with them with pads or tampons, causing embarrassing accidents. A prolonged period is one that lasts longer than 7 days. Menstrual periods can range from painless, to mild cramping, to severe, debilitating pain causing missed work.

Fortunately, if you suffer from heavy, prolonged, or painful periods, there are now solutions available, which are so effective, that the need for hysterectomy has become uncommon.

Common Causes:

- Anovulation (failure of ovaries to produce or release eggs)
- Endometrial polyps (growths that hang from in the lining of the uterus)
- Endometrial hyperplasia (abnormal thickening of the uterine lining)
- Endometriosis (uterine lining tissue growing in abnormal locations)
- Uterine fibroids (non-cancerous uterine tumors)
- Uterine cancer
- Abnormal thyroid or pituitary function
- Pregnancy complications -- like miscarriage or ectopic pregnancy
- Hormonal changes, such as menopause
- Changes in birth control pills or estrogens that you take
- Drugs such as aspirin or warfarin
- Use of an intrauterine device (IUD) for birth control
- Pelvic infection
- Stress, change in diet or exercise routine, recent weight loss or weight gain, or illness

Call your doctor if:

- You have soaked through a pad or tampon every hour for 6 hours.
- Your bleeding has lasted longer than one week.
- You are pregnant.
- You have severe pain, especially if you also have pain when not menstruating.
- Your periods have been heavy or prolonged for 3 or more cycles, compared to what is normal for you.
- You have a fever or abnormal vaginal discharge, especially if it has an odor.
- You have bleeding after [menopause](#).
- You have bleeding or spotting between periods.
- You have nipple discharge, excessive hair growth, deepening voice, unintentional weight loss or gain, or new acne.

Treatments:

Treatment for abnormal menstrual periods is directed at finding and correcting the underlying abnormality. Female hormones (birth control pills or progestins) are commonly used to regulate menses. Prostaglandin inhibitors such as ibuprofen or naproxen, if used properly, can often lighten menstrual flow and decrease pain. When bleeding is horrendously heavy, it can be stopped with higher dose hormones or, in some cases a dilation and curettage, "D and C".

For chronic menstrual problems that are unresponsive to medical treatments the greatest advance has been a variety of "ablative" treatments. In a single treatment that can take 3 to 10 minutes, the lining of the uterus and the tissue layer from which it grows, can be ablated, using cold, heat, or electrocautery. These therapies are effective in up to 90% of women, either eliminating menstrual periods entirely or reducing them to being light and easily tolerated. These procedures have dramatically reduced the need for hysterectomies. Other procedures include hysteroscopic myomectomy, which allows the removal of uterine fibroids without an abdominal incision.

To learn more about the latest treatments for heavy, prolonged or painful menstrual periods, contact your gynecologist.

Michael J. Seeber, DO FACOOG