

## Help! I'm PMSing!

*“Just before my period each month I get so moody, irritable and depressed. I get tired and bloated, and I can't stop binging on sweets!”*

*If that sounds familiar, then read on for urgent PMS support...*

PMS is a condition that affects many women during the one or two weeks before menstruation, and usually disappears as menstruation begins.

Causes of PMS are usually hormonal imbalances, where there are higher levels of hormones such as oestrogen and progesterone. It is not a psychological disorder, as many tend to think; in fact, it includes several physical and emotional changes.

### ***Am I PMSing?***

PMS affects each woman differently, but general symptoms can often apply to both physical and emotional wellbeing.

Physical symptoms that usually accompany PMS include tiredness, bloating, water retention, weight gain, breast tenderness, acne, headaches/migraines, and constipation. Emotionally, PMS most often affects mood and can manifest itself in symptoms such as depression, anxiety, irritability, mood swings, crying spells, and sugar cravings.

### ***Quick Fix!***

Supporting PMS sufferers nutritionally is crucial for their condition. Although each person differs in the way their body deals with PMS, the main nutritional guidelines apply to almost all women, and can be outlined as follows:

- **Blood sugar balancing diet** – the higher the sugar in the diet, the worse the symptoms. Sugar in the diet comes not only from eating sweets and desserts, but also from refined carbohydrates and processed foods such as white rice and some breakfast cereals. What is needed is frequent meals and snacks (eat little and often). Avoid refined and sugary foods. Eat more complex carbohydrates (wholegrains, pulses, fruits/vegetables). And add some protein to all meals and snacks (especially breakfast) such as eggs, nuts, seeds, and hummus
- **Increase fibre** – fibre in the diet helps the body get rid of toxins and excess hormones. It is readily available in fruits and vegetables and complex carbohydrates such as brown rice, wholegrain breads and pastas. Try to have some fibre-rich foods daily
- **Avoid caffeine and other stimulants such as cigarettes** – caffeine is often linked to PMS and breast symptoms. It is best to avoid or minimise coffee and tea intake if you suffer from PMS, and experiment with herbal or fruit teas instead. Smoking also adds to the body's toxic load especially during PMS, which makes the liver work harder at dealing with the excess hormones
- **Optimise liver function** – supporting the liver ensures efficient excretion of 'old' oestrogens. Avoid alcohol and eat more cruciferous vegetables (e.g. cauliflower, broccoli, brussels sprouts) for optimum liver function
- **Exercise** – exercise promotes endorphins, the 'feel good' factor, which helps uplift mood
- **Reduce stress** – stress exacerbates PMS symptoms and hinders the body's own healing mechanisms. Try to reduce stress or apply stress management techniques such as exercise, yoga/meditation, or just listening to music.
- **Address any food intolerances** – symptoms of food intolerance are very similar to PMS and it is very easy to confuse the two; so food intolerances are best identified and addressed
- In some cases, **avoiding dairy products** also helps because they tend to be oestrogenic and may further increase the hormone imbalance in the body

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## ***Helpful Nutrients***

- **Essential fats** are very important to female health in general, and hormone health in particular. They are not produced in the body and we need to include them in our diet on a daily basis. They are found generally in raw nuts and seeds and their oils. Evening primrose oil is also beneficial for PMS
- **B complex vitamins, especially B6** – B vitamins are used for energy, and they also help elevate mood. B vitamins are also used for the metabolism of essential fats and for supporting the adrenal glands that deal with stress. B vitamins are found in foods such as wholegrains (e.g. brown rice), green leafy vegetables, and avocados
- **Vitamin E** is helpful for breast symptoms, mood swings, and irritability. It is abundant in foods such as avocados, wheatgerm, nuts and seeds, and olive oil
- **Calcium / Magnesium** – greater Calcium intake is often associated with lower incidence of severe PMS. Magnesium is vital for anxiety, tension and emotional states, and it is usually low in PMS sufferers. Foods rich in calcium and magnesium include beans, lentils, and raw nuts such as almonds and cashews
- **Zinc** is another mineral that is usually low in PMS sufferers. It is needed for proper hormone function; and it is also required for insulin and other hormone production. Zinc is found in seeds (especially pumpkin seeds) and shellfish such as prawns and oysters
- **Iron** is also usually low in PMS sufferers, especially if blood loss is high during the monthly periods. It is therefore important to acquire adequate iron from the diet. Iron-rich foods include meat, fish and poultry and vegetarian proteins such as beans and lentils

### **Beat the chocolate cravings!**

Many women crave chocolate during the period just before menstruation. The main reason for this is that chocolate contains sugar and caffeine which are needed for the immediate energy requirements that a blood sugar imbalance would induce. But also, chocolate contains a significant amount of magnesium, which the body requires during this time.

To prevent chocolate cravings, it is better to eat other magnesium-rich foods such as dried apricots, figs or peaches to satisfy the sugar cravings without using up other vital nutrients. Also, combining these foods with some protein such as raw nuts and seeds (which also contain magnesium) will help balance blood sugar levels and prevent cravings.

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