IN CARE OF KIDS
Dysmenorrhea: Painful Periods & Cramps

What is dysmenorrhea?
Dysmenorrhea is the medical word for cramps and/or pain that some teens or women have around the time of their period.

- The pain can be dull, burning, throbbing, or sharp.
- It is most often found in lower abdomen (gut) above the pubic bone. The pain can be in the center, right, or left sides. Sometimes, there is also pain in the lower back and thighs.
- The pain usually happens when there is menstrual bleeding, but there can also be pain at other times.
- Along with the pain, there can also be nausea (upset stomach), vomiting (throwing up), diarrhea, constipation, feeling very tired, dizziness, or fainting.

What causes dysmenorrhea?
The uterus is the organ inside a woman’s body that causes menstrual bleeding. It has a lining (endometrium) that reacts to the hormones estrogen and progestin. When the uterine lining sheds or bleeds, the uterine muscles squeeze. For women who have dysmenorrhea, the squeezing muscles cause the nerves in the pelvic area to send pain messages to the brain.

Why do I have dysmenorrhea?
For most teens and women, we don’t know the exact cause of dysmenorrhea and no abnormality can be found. The diagnosis is most often made after a careful health history which shows that menstrual pain is interfering with daily life. An internal (or pelvic) exam is not needed to diagnose dysmenorrhea.

There are other causes of painful periods such as endometriosis, adenomysosis, and fibroids. These are not common in girls and teens, so as a rule testing for these problems is not done unless treatment for dysmenorrhea is not helping.

What else should I know about dysmenorrhea?
- As many as 1 in 4 teens have severe pain or dysmenorrhea with their periods.
- for some girls and teens, painful periods can be very embarrassing to talk about with their parents, teachers, coaches, and even their doctor/nurse. Being embarrassed can make girls/teens be slow to ask for help.
- Dysmenorrhea is one of the most common reasons that girls and teens miss school.
For many women, dysmenorrhea gets better as she gets older.

What can I do about dysmenorrhea?

The first step in treating problem periods is looking at the big picture and seeing what changes can be made.

We know that these changes can help:

- Eat nutritious, healthy foods including fruits, veggies, protein and complex carbs (such as whole wheat breads and grains)
- Stop eating, or greatly limit eating, fast foods and sugary drinks like soda, juices, energy drinks and sweet teas.
- Exercise: try to do at least 60 minutes each day. This is the goal.
- Sleep enough: 8 hours each night is the goal, and catch up when needed.
- Learn relaxation techniques and ways to handle stress.
- Get help for depression and anxiety (worry), if needed.

For cramps and pain these things can help:

- Use a heating-pad on the lower abdomen (belly), or over the painful part.
- Take a warm bath or shower.
- Use over-the-counter pain meds such as ibuprofen. This drug can be taken every 6 to 8 hours on the days you have cramps. It works best when it is used right away instead of waiting until the pain becomes fierce.
- Keep track of bleeding days and days that cramps/pain are a problem. Notice what makes it better or worse (if anything).

When is hormonal therapy recommended?

If teens have tried the suggestions given in this handout but the pain is still interfering with their daily life, then hormonal therapy is recommended. These drugs are safe for girls and teen girls to use, and they work very well.

Some types of hormonal therapy are:

- Low dose birth control pills, patch, or ring
- Extended or continuous use of birth control pills, patch or ring
- Medroxyprogesterone acetate (Depo-Provera)
- A levonorgestrel-IUD (Mirena, Skyla) (intrauterine device)
- A subdermal implant (Nexplanon)

While these drugs are packaged as “birth control,” they are being recommended for their effects on menstrual pain. This means they lower or stop bleeding and pain, and can be used to make periods regular. They can also help with other problems like acne, premenstrual mood changes, or headaches.