



Calcium plays role in halting PMS symptoms

Premenstrual syndrome or PMS is often thought to be just one of those unavoidable consequences of being a woman. Many women report some undesirable symptoms related to menstruation. But as many as 10 percent of young to middle-aged women experience very painful and disabling symptoms on a monthly basis.

Question: What are the usual symptoms of PMS?

Answer: The symptoms used to diagnose PMS include depression, angry outbursts, irritability, anxiety, confusion, social withdrawal, breast tenderness, abdominal bloating, headache and swelling of extremities. If a woman repeatedly experiences at least two of these symptoms during her premenstrual period, it is considered to be a diagnosis of PMS.

Q: What causes PMS?

A: There are many theories that mostly revolve around the effects of fluctuating hormone levels. However, this is confusing because many women do not experience PMS even though they have the usual hormonal changes.

Q: How is PMS treated?

A: A wide variety of drugs are used including antidepressants, anti-anxiety medications and drugs that suppress ovulation. However, what may help one woman may not work for another.

Q: Can nutrition play a role in preventing PMS?

A: Many things have been tried with limited success. Thirty years ago, taking high doses of vitamin B-6 was popular until it was found that excessive intake could cause irreversible nerve damage.

Today, a number of studies are finding that the most effective treatment for PMS is to increase calcium intake. Interestingly, the symptoms of low blood calcium are very similar to those of PMS.

Most studies have used supplements that provide about 1,000 milligrams of calcium per day in the form of calcium carbonate. One very well designed study that provided 1,200 milligrams of calcium per day found that symptoms gradually declined at first, but by the third month, the calcium supplements

greatly reduced depression and irritability, water retention, food cravings and pain.

Q: Are there any other indications that calcium is related to PMS?

A: Yes. Two studies found that the risk of developing osteoporosis is much greater in women with a history of PMS. Since the risk of osteoporosis is greater in those with a low calcium diet, the connection is obvious.

For many women, decreasing the risk of getting osteoporosis at some time far in the future has not been enough incentive to increase their calcium intake. Maybe the promise of quelling the ravages of PMS within a few months provides more incentive to make that change.

Q: Can a woman get too much calcium?

A: Yes. The U.S. Food and Nutrition Board recommends that total calcium intake from supplements and food not exceed 2,500 milligrams per day.

Also, maintaining an adequate intake of other nutrients is essential if calcium is to provide benefit.

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