

'That Time of the Month' for School Nurses

By Nancy J. Gallagher, RN, BS

Dysmenorrhea, or a painful menstrual cycle period, is the major cause of activity restriction and school absence among adolescent girls. The condition affects adolescent girls across all racial and ethnic populations. For some, the pain is severe and debilitating. The cause of dysmenorrhea has not been clearly determined, but prostaglandins seem to play an important role. In the uterus, prostaglandins cause muscular contractions. These contractions, or "cramps," help to expel the uterine lining during menses.


School nurses are familiar with students who struggle monthly with significant discomfort during menstruation. Students visit health offices complaining of cramps, headache, nausea or just feeling ill. Some would like to be excused from classes and activities during those days. Requests such as "Can I lie down just for an hour?" seem to occur predictably for some students who are going through their monthly cycles. The discomfort may be so severe that they may not be able to remain in school for the day and may be out sick for several more.

Methods of treatment for dysmenorrhea are as varied as the population. Usually teenagers will try OTC medications (Pamprin, Midol, Advil, or Tylenol) for

relief of menstrual discomfort. These over-the-counter medications are often self-prescribed at home and/or ordered by a health care practitioner for use at school. Home remedies vary from hot water bottles and heating pads to specific exercises and special foods. When the pain is severe enough, medical advice may be sought. The health care practitioner, whether it be family doctor, pediatrician or gynecologist, may then prescribe an anti-inflammatory medication such as Naproxen or an oral contraceptive for their patients. Both treatments may be helpful, but there have been no controlled studies to determine what is the standard for dysmenorrhea. However, girls are often under-treated for dysmenorrhea, suffer in silence, or do not seek medical help.

Dr. Anne R. Davis, at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, Department of OB/GYN, is conducting a National Institutes of Health (NIH) three-month study for girls aged 19 years and younger to determine if a hormone treatment will lessen menstrual pain. Girls will be randomly selected to receive either a hormone pill or a placebo and asked questions about their monthly menstrual period and mental health. The study requires two office visits and two telephone calls.

This study will investigate whether teenagers routinely self-medicate with over-the-counter drugs, and whether they depend upon a particular remedy that provides them with relief and comfort. Self-esteem, depression, and quality of life are some of the issues that will also be investigated in this study. For instance, does depression play a role in refusing to participate in activities during menstruation? Or is it solely due to menstrual discomfort?

This research study will help school nurses and other health professionals gain better insight into the emotional, physical and social factors that exist for young women with dysmenorrhea. Findings will be of importance for adolescents not only for the treatment of pain but also to identify other social and behavioral issues associated with dysmenorrhea. If you would like more information, please contact Dr. Anne Davis at (212) 305-4805 or by e-mail at ard4@columbia.edu. 

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