Period and chocolate cause irregularity? [1]

Dear Alice,

I have noticed that when I am on my period, I defecate and fart much more frequently than usual. I was wondering why this was the case. I also find that chocolate works as a natural laxative for me. Why is that?

?Usually regular

Answer

Dear Usually regular,

Many women have digestive troubles as part of premenstrual syndrome (PMS). Attention to your diet and regular exercise may help you stay regular while Aunt Floe is in town.

At the beginning of your cycle, special chemicals called prostaglandins enter the bloodstream. Prostaglandins are like rabble-rousers that cause your uterus to contract, releasing your menstrual flow. At the same time, prostaglandins also speed up the normal contractions in your intestines. Common side-effects of this commotion include abdominal cramps, diarrhea, and nausea. For more information about menstrual irregularity, take a look at the Women's Sexual Health Category [2] in the Reproductive and Sexual Health Archives [3].

To minimize PMS and promote regularity, consider these suggestions before and during your period:

- **Eat well.** Stock up on whole grains, fresh produce, and other high-fiber [4] foods. Try to stay hydrated and avoid bloating [5] by drinking lots of water and fruit juice. Also consider cutting down on known stomach irritants, such as salt, sugar, alcohol, and caffeine, or avoid them altogether.
- **Eat often, a little at a time.** Try eating mini-meals or hearty snacks throughout the day rather than two or three bigger meals.
- **Keep your body moving.** Although it's often the last thing you want to do while on your period, exercise helps soothe cramps and keeps your digestive system on track.
- **Get your rest.** Aim for eight hours of sleep. Following a daily routine with the same times for wake up, meals, exercise, and turning in may be helpful.

As for chocolate, it's high fat content may contribute to more frequent trips to the bathroom. Chocolate also contains a small amount of caffeine, a known stomach irritant. Sugar-free
varieties are often made with chemicals (hexitol, sorbitol, and mannitol) that may cause diarrhea. Lastly, milk chocolate is part dairy, so if you're lactose-intolerant, the milk sugars may be the cause of your runs. In that case, stick to dark chocolate with a high cocoa percentage and less or no lactose.

Digestive upset is no picnic, but hopefully these suggestions will help you stay regular during your period!

Alice!
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