

Foods that minimize menstrual cramps? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

What kinds of foods are good to eat during the menstrual cycle? For example, are there any kinds of foods that can reduce cramps?

— Curious

Answer

Dear Curious,

Menstrual cramps are a real pain. Menstrual cramps are considered the most common gynecological condition in women all over the world, regardless of age or nationality. In fact, for up to 15 percent of women, cramps can interfere with work or other activities for at least one day per month. Fortunately, there are many dietary adjustments you can make to help prevent and treat cramping during your period. Although dietary adjustments can certainly have an impact on the severity of menstrual cramps, keep in mind that changes to your diet may take weeks or months to have measurable effects. However, dietary changes are long lasting, relatively easy to implement, and contribute to other aspects of your health, unlike many over the counter and prescription pain medications.

There are a few general guidelines to follow that you may have heard of already. First, caffeine and alcohol have been found to exacerbate menstrual cramp pain. Cut out coffee, caffeinated tea, and alcohol immediately before and during your period and opt for herbal teas and water instead. Additionally, steer clear from excessive salt intake during your period (try to stay under 2000 milligrams per day), because bloating and water retention can worsen menstrual pain and cause you to feel dehydrated. Exercise can also help relieve stress and tension all throughout the month, but it will also promote blood circulation and reduce menstrual cramp pain during your cycle. Finally, eating smaller portions more frequently throughout the day can help you stay energized during your period, which will help you get up, move around, and show your symptoms who's boss.

Prostaglandins, the substances responsible for many menstrual symptoms, are part of the inflammation response. They're believed to temporarily disrupt blood and oxygen flow to the

uterus, resulting in pain, cramping, swelling, and stiffness. Sound familiar? Fortunately, the following nutrients can reduce the production of prostaglandins and speed up the elimination of these substances. Not only will these nutrients help you fight menstrual cramps, but they also help you meet recommended dietary guidelines and promote your overall health.

- **Calcium** is known to relieve muscle tension, which triggers menstrual cramps. Eat plenty of dark, leafy greens such as kale and broccoli, and try incorporating low fat milk and yogurts into your diet. For food sources of calcium, see [Calcium — How much is enough?](#) [2]
- **High fiber** vegetables, fruits, beans, whole grains, and other plant foods can reduce menstrual pain because they help to absorb and eliminate prostaglandins. Acting as a sponge, fiber soaks up these substances in the liver and carries them out with other waste. Good sources of fiber include brown rice, whole-grain bread, broccoli, spinach, carrots, kidney beans, peas, lentils, and assorted fruits.
- **Anti-inflammatory omega-3 fatty acids**, found in cold-water fish (salmon, cod, and halibut), flaxseed, and walnuts, help to reduce the production of prostaglandins. This prevents hormone cycling, a major cause of menstrual cramp pain.
- **Vitamin E** may inhibit prostaglandin synthesis, thereby preventing inflammation and cramping. Good sources of Vitamin E include sunflower seeds, almonds, and peanut butter.
- **Vitamin B6** helps to reduce pain and is found in high concentrations in bananas, lentils, chickpeas, oatmeal, lean beef, and chicken breast.
- **Zinc** has been shown to reduce premenstrual pain and bloating and is found in oysters, red meat, and poultry.
- **Magnesium** deficiency can worsen menstrual cramps. The severity and duration of menstrual cramps can be reduced by restoring magnesium to normal levels via the consumption of cashews, wheat germ, and pinto beans.
- **Vitamin B3**, also known as niacin, was cited in one study as responsible for cramp reduction in 90 percent of symptomatic women by reducing uterine artery spasms. Good sources of niacin include bran, tuna, paprika, and sundried tomatoes.

Every woman experiences menstrual pain and cramping differently. For various women, some of the strategies listed above provide more relief than others. Leading a healthy lifestyle throughout the month may provide you with the best results. If you decide to try any supplements, discuss them first with your health care provider to prevent against any adverse interactions with other medications you may be taking (including oral contraceptives). In addition, be sure to visit your gynecologist for an examination to determine if the reason for your cramps may be due to another medical condition.

Alice!

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