



IS PMS MAKING YOU CRAZY?

Never fear, help is here. There is a lot you can do to make the madness go away. FRANCES POWER asks the experts.

Let's be honest, how many of us have found ourselves channelling Kathy Bates in *Misery* only to realise that the problem was not really the kids misbehaving, the boss upping our workload or the planets colliding, but our own out-of-sorts hormonal system?

Somewhere between 70 to 90 per cent of women suffer from premenstrual

symptoms in the week before the start of their period each month. And the symptoms can include anything from breast tenderness to cramping, cravings, mood swings, aggression, nausea, irritability and panic attacks. For up to 40 per cent, it may mean time off work, painkillers and hot water bottles, but for a small percentage, around 3 per cent, the monthly onset is so awful that they

experience a psychiatric condition known as premenstrual dysphoric disorder and can become suicidal.

Even in less severe cases, PMS doesn't just affect domestic harmony, or the rhythm of a working life. There are serious reasons why women should pay attention to the monthly rollercoaster. According to Dr Phil Boyle, fertility specialist at the Galway Clinic, "Women should be concerned about PMS because it is associated with a higher incidence of both infertility and miscarriage." They are also more likely to have a bumpy trip through menopause.

Lately, science has begun to turn its attention to PMS. A recent study found that small doses of the anti-anxiety drug Prozac might just help. Dr Thelma Lovick, a neuroscientist involved in the study at the University of Birmingham, believes that she may have discovered the underlying cause. The symptoms appear when levels of progesterone, a calming hormone, fall during the premenstrual period. This leads to a fall in levels of a neuroactive steroid in the brain, *allo*. As a result, the person becomes more excitable and more responsive to stress. Tiny doses of the antidepressant Prozac (*fluoxetine*) were found to raise *allo* concentrations. It "completely blocked development of their PMS symptoms," says Dr Lovick. But it will take some years before the findings come out of the lab and into trial.

Until then, what else in the medical cabinet helps? Dr Rachel Mackey, gynaecologist at the Women's Health Clinic in Dun Laoghaire, says, "Yasmin and Yaz, its low-dose equivalent, are recommended choices of oral contraceptive pills, which can help to alleviate symptoms ... For severe cases, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is recommended to help with the psychological distress caused by severe PMS."

At the Galway Clinic, Dr Phil Boyle practises NaProTechnology, a system that teaches you to chart your cycle minutely to identify any imbalance. "[It] can successfully treat PMS in over 90 per cent of cases," he says. "It is simple to treat by recording the fertility cycle and taking progesterone

in the second half of the cycle in a precisely timed fashion - under the care of a doctor trained in NaProTechnology techniques. If the symptoms are moderate to severe, correcting the hormonal imbalance can be very effective and satisfying for those who need it."

But before you turn to drugs or hormones, the good news is that a lot can be done to rebalance your system just by making lifestyle changes. While science is exploring the exact cause,

one thing is clear – certain lifestyle factors make PMS worse. According to acupuncturist Emma Cannon, who runs an integrated women's health clinic in the UK, and whose fans include Eva Herzigová and Sophie Dahl, "Hectic lifestyle, irregular eating, skipping meals, drinking alcohol on an empty stomach, travelling in different time zones, even our emotions can impact on our menstrual cycle and cause problems such as PMS." If that sounds like your average week, beware. Emma says, "this wreaks havoc on blood sugar levels and causes many of the symptoms associated with PMS."

If there's one thing we can influence, it is what we put into our bodies. "Nutrition is the single most important factor in whether or not a woman will have PMS," says Dr Guy Abraham, former Professor of Obstetrics, Gynaecology, and Endocrinology at the UCLA School of Medicine. "This

is why we see so much PMS among women in their thirties. Most of them have been pregnant, which has depleted their bodies of nutrients, so they're more likely to be deficient in the B vitamins and magnesium."

As Heather Leeson, nutritional therapist at Positive Nutrition in Dublin, says, "We see many women in the clinic who have been putting up with PMS for many years, in some cases with severe symptoms. Lots of these women feel that the options offered to them by their doctors (usually antidepressants or the Pill) are not the answer for them.

They find that the natural route is much more effective, even if it requires some effort to make dietary or lifestyle changes."

While it may be the last thing you feel like, saying no to that chocolate bar and yes to a walk in the park may turn out to be the best remedy for the monthly blues. ■

A US study found that women most likely to suffer from PMS consume 62 per cent more refined carbs, 275 per cent more refined sugar, 79 per cent more dairy products, 78 per cent sodium, 53 per cent less iron, 77 per cent less manganese and 53 per cent less zinc than those who eat the "standard American diet" ...

THE PMS DIARY: PERIOD T-MINUS 3 DAYS

Day 1 - Monday

Morning General overall tired feeling, legs achy and want to curl up in bed. On the way to work, for no reason at all, want to burst into tears; life is great, so absolutely no reason except listening to songs on the radio and they're not even sad songs, I'm just sad. Spots on my neck and chin!

Lunch Craving for fizzy drinks and fizzy sweets has kicked in, need Diet Coke.

Evening Incredibly irritable by Monday night, can't articulate sentences and brain not functioning at normal capacity. Want food, takeaway food, bold food - Indian takeaway.

Day 2 - Tuesday

Morning Jeans won't fit, tummy has swollen and is bloated, have to wear a dress today as suppressing the swelling is actually physically painful. Mood is low, need to tell brain it is hormones and will pass.

Mid-morning Need food, can't get bacon butty out of my head, normal breakfast is bowl of cereal, that will not suffice today!

Lunch Food, food, food - I need food and lots of it! Feel like snapping at everyone!

Afternoon I catch myself staring into space, not much going in and not wanting to participate in much either in the office.

Evening Must avoid mum, sister or anyone close to me who could spark off a heated debate, best to have a long bath and be on my own as tendency to be over-sensitive. Brain again a little muddled, managed to leave my hand in the fridge, and only realised it was there when I closed the door on it, have walked into two tables today. Breasts are throbbing.

Day 3 - Wednesday

Morning Tummy swollen beyond belief, what to wear to work, when I just want to stay in pyjamas. Legs aching, not much of an appetite. Diarrhoea starts.

Mid-morning Diarrhoea continues.

Lunch Period arrives, not much of a flow, cramps and swelling are awful, can't sit, stand, take a painkiller, no appetite.

Evening Flow gets heavier, clotting and need to go to the loo every 20-30 minutes for 5-6 hours. However, somewhat relieved to be over the sad, low three days and irritable irrational mood swings!

WHAT YOU CAN DO ...

EAT A DIET RICH IN OILY FISH, lean meats, vegetables, nuts, seeds, wholegrains and pulses and low in refined and processed foods. This will provide the nutrients you need, such as B vitamins, omega 3s and magnesium, to balance hormones.

DUMP THE CAFFEINE Heather Leeson of Positive Nutrition says, "Coffee contains theobromines, which may contribute to breast tenderness."

UP YOUR INTAKE OF OESTROGEN EXCRETORS, such as cruciferous vegetables (those greens - broccoli, kale, cauliflower, Brussel sprouts and cabbage), says Maria Cross, author of *I Wish I Hadn't Eaten That* (Hay House, £10.99). They contain indole-3-carbinols, chemicals that help to promote the breakdown of oestrogen in the liver and so rebalance hormones. Also up your intake of limonenes as found in the oil of citrus fruits (lemons, oranges, grapefruit, tangerines, satsumas, clementines), which help detox excess oestrogens.

WHEN ALL YOU WANT TO DO IS SNACK on sugar and cupcakes, resist. Balancing your blood sugar will help your mood and energy, try to eat low GI, and make sure there's good-quality protein with each meal. Little and often is the rule.

SUPPLEMENT WITH A GOOD PROBIOTIC, suggests Heather Leeson, to help bloating or constipation; vitamin B6 (50mg) taken with magnesium (200mg daily) can help improve blood supply to cells and help symptoms; omega 3s help regulate hormone production and act as an anti-inflammatory; while vitamin E (400iu daily, as d-alpha-tocopherol) helps breast tenderness, mood swings and irritability.

LOOK AFTER YOUR LIVER It processes all the hormones and toxins you take in. If it's overloaded, your hormones may be recirculated, making any imbalance worse. Dysbiosis, nutrient deficiency, heavy metal toxicity, alcohol, smoking and the Pill and xenoestrogens all create more work for the liver, says Heather Leeson.

TRY ACUPUNCTURE "In my practice," says Emma Cannon, "we use acupuncture to help regulate the menstrual cycle. It is very effective and even patients who have suffered for many years find their symptoms improve."

TAKE UP CALMING PRACTICES Meditation and yoga are helpful for relaxation, and managing stress. Higher levels of stress hormones longer term affect female hormone production and can inhibit the body's ability to use progesterone, leading to hormone imbalance, says Heather Leeson.

EXERCISE - BUT NOT TO EXCESS "Exercise releases endorphins," says nutritionist Ian Marber, known as The Food Doctor (www.thefooddoctor.com), "the body's natural chemicals are known to lift our mood, and since many PMS symptoms are associated with changes in mood, it makes sense that encouraging good endorphin production through exercise can help to reduce the severity of PMS."

CHART YOUR CYCLE Knowledge is power - once you realise that PMS is making you weepy or crave carbs, it is easier to tackle.

TACKLE A WEIGHT PROBLEM Dr Rachel Mackey points out that "PMS is more common in obese women".