

Patient information from BMJ

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Heavy periods

Heavy periods are menstrual periods that last longer than they should or where there is more bleeding than is usual. They are not usually a sign of anything serious. They can disrupt your life and make you feel miserable but there are treatments that can help.

We've looked at the best and most up-to-date research to produce this information. You can use it to talk to your doctor and decide which treatments are right for you.

Do you find heavy periods a problem?

You may find it hard to judge whether your periods are heavy. Even talking to friends about it may not help. Women often have different ideas about what it means to have heavy periods.

Doctors say that you have heavy menstrual bleeding if you have excessive blood loss during your periods that interferes with your quality of life. This can mean your social, emotional, or work life.

Here's a list of things that might help you judge whether you have heavy periods.

- You use more than nine pads or tampons (or both pads and tampons) on your heaviest days.
- You have to wear both a tampon and a pad (double protection).
- Your period lasts more than six days.
- You have to get up at night to change your protection.
- You pass clots of blood.
- You stain your bedding or clothes despite wearing tampons and pads.
- You stay at home during your period because you are worried about having an 'accident'.
- You feel tired, especially during your period. This could mean your body is low in iron. This is caused by a type of anaemia called iron-deficiency anaemia. It happens when your body is not able to make enough new red blood cells to make up for blood you lost during your period.

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Your doctor can find out if you have anaemia by testing a sample of your blood. If your red cell count is low you may need treatment, such as iron tablets, to help you make more red cells.

Some women have heavy periods all the time, while others have them only at certain times in their lives. For example, during puberty or in the year or so before the menopause.

If you're approaching the menopause you may not want to do anything about your heavy bleeding because you know your periods will stop soon. But if your periods are heavy for more than a few months and they're making your life miserable, you may want to get help from your doctor.

What causes unusual vaginal bleeding?

Many women have heavy menstrual bleeding that doesn't have any obvious cause and that doesn't cause them any major problems.

But unusual vaginal bleeding, including sudden changes to your periods, could be caused by another medical condition that needs treatment. So it's always important to see your doctor if you have unusual vaginal bleeding: for example, if you bleed after sex or between your periods, or if your periods suddenly become heavier.

Tests

Your doctor might be able to get a good idea of what might be causing your symptoms just by asking you about them. For example, he or she will ask you the age at which you started having periods, and how regular they have been since they began.

They may also ask about other things, including whether you have had any sudden weight loss or weight gain, and if you get tired very easily. And they might suggest a physical examination.

Your doctor might also want to do one or more tests, such as:

- A pregnancy test. It's possible to be pregnant without knowing it. And, even though menstrual periods stop during pregnancy, unusual bleeding can occur. Some women may also have an ectopic pregnancy. This is when a fertilised egg develops outside the uterus (womb).
- A blood test. This can show whether you have a hormonal imbalance, or if you have anaemia.
- A hysteroscopy. This involves looking inside the womb with a camera.
- A biopsy. This involves taking a sample of tissue for testing.
- An ultrasound scan. This is the same type of scan that a pregnant woman has to check on her growing baby's progress. It can also spot signs of some conditions that can cause unusual bleeding.

These are some of the conditions that can cause heavy menstrual bleeding or unusual vaginal bleeding:

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Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)

If you have PCOS your hormones are not in balance. The hormones made by your ovaries are the ones most affected. Among other things these hormones affect your periods.

Fibroids

Fibroids are lumps that grow in the womb. But they don't usually cause any problems. They're not cancer and they're very common. Most women with fibroids have no symptoms. But in some women they can cause problems, including heavy periods.

Miscarriage

Most miscarriages happen during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. One of the symptoms of a miscarriage is vaginal bleeding. If you have bleeding while pregnant you should get medical help straight away.

Endometritis

Endometritis is inflammation (swelling) of the lining of the womb (uterus). It's usually caused by an infection. It can happen when there are major changes that affect the uterus: for example, after giving birth, having a miscarriage, or having some types of medical procedure or surgery.

One of the symptoms of endometritis is vaginal bleeding. If it's not treated it can cause serious complications, including sepsis (an infection in the blood).

Pelvic inflammatory disease (PID)

PID is an infection in your reproductive organs, usually transmitted during sex, which causes inflammation. These organs include your womb, ovaries, and fallopian tubes. One of the symptoms is unusual vaginal bleeding.

Dysfunctional uterine bleeding (DUB)

DUB is prolonged or frequent bleeding from the uterus that isn't connected to pregnancy or an infection. It is thought to be caused by an imbalance of hormones in the ovaries.

Endometrial polyps

These are non-cancerous growths in the lining of the uterus, which can cause unusual bleeding.

Other causes of vaginal bleeding can include cervical cancer, ectopic pregnancy, and kidney or liver problems. These are less common causes of vaginal bleeding than those listed above. But it's important to see your doctor if you are concerned about any issues around your periods or vaginal bleeding - even just for your peace of mind.

What treatments work?

If you have heavy periods that are not caused by another medical condition it doesn't mean you have to put up with it. There are treatments that can help make your periods lighter.

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Your doctor may suggest one of the following treatments to help reduce your bleeding. You can discuss with your doctor which treatment might suit you best. If the first treatment you try doesn't help, you may be able to try another.

Drug treatments

- A medicine called tranexamic acid can help women have lighter bleeding. But some women have side effects with this medicine, including leg cramps and feeling sick.
- Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) may help if your periods are painful as well as heavy. People who have heart problems should not take an NSAID called diclofenac.
- Some women have a contraceptive coil fitted that gradually releases the hormone progesterone into their womb. This treatment reduces bleeding for most women. For some women, this coil stops their periods completely after about 12 months. You may have heard this called an IUD (intrauterine device). It is a contraceptive, so you probably won't be able to get pregnant if you have one fitted.

You might bleed slightly more during the first few months after you have this coil fitted and you might bleed between periods. You may also feel bloated and have tender breasts.

- The combined contraceptive pill contains the hormones oestrogen and progesterone. This can help regulate your periods and reduce bleeding.
- Gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH) analogues are drugs that can reduce bleeding. But they can cause side effects similar to symptoms of the menopause, as well as weaker bones in some women.
- Progesterone tablets aren't normally used for heavy periods. But they may be prescribed if you're having a very heavy or long period, or to prevent bleeding. Progesterone is the hormone contained in the progesterone-only pill (also called the mini-pill), which is used as a contraceptive. Progesterone tablets can cause side effects in some women, including headaches, breast tenderness, stomach upsets, tiredness, and bloating.

Surgical treatments

Surgery isn't usually recommended for heavy periods that aren't caused by another condition. But if your symptoms don't get better with other treatments and your quality of life is badly affected, there are options.

- **Dilatation and curettage (D&C)** is a procedure to remove some of the lining of your womb. This can make your periods lighter. Some women's periods stop altogether after this procedure. The operation is done through the vagina, so you won't need to be cut or have stitches.
- If you have fibroids, having an operation to remove them (called a **myomectomy**) might make your periods lighter. This operation can be done through a cut in the abdomen or through the vagina.

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