

BODY • MIND • SPIRIT

FIGHTING BACK AGAINST THE DREADED PMS ATTACK BY BETTINA MARKS

It's morning, and I awake after a not-so-restful sleep. I now know why my whole body was aching yesterday. I thought it was because I overdid my power dance and yoga classes this week. Then, I look at the date. Okay, it all makes sense. Here it goes—the beginning of the week of hell, otherwise known as PMS. The week before my period begins.

I'd purchased a 100-tablet bottle of ibuprofen to ready myself. I deliberate about taking a tour through the "women's" aisle at the health-food store, and then I remember how much I earn and think again. Plus, I'm assaulted with supposed remedies. Can't they just make one pill that works, which includes the necessary daily vitamins in addition to the "special" formulas?

PMS symptoms are believed to result from a relative imbalance between estrogen and progesterone. Symptoms include pain, migraines, dizziness, irritability, temper flares, crying, sleep disturbance, low libido, water retention, breast pain, depression, mood swings, upset stomach, nausea, diarrhea, constipation, hot flashes and appetite changes. Tons of fun.

I think women have been reluctant to admit to suffering from these symptoms for fear that it would set us back in our quest for equality. But I've been thinking about those who were piloting the fighter jets that recently dropped the bombs on Iraq. I wouldn't feel capable of flying those planes or manning a Bradley during my PMS week. I just wouldn't. Women have gained unprecedented rights in the Army, and when Jessica Lynch fired at her captors in self-defense, women were forever taken from behind the scenes to the front lines. I don't want to speculate about where she was in her cycle.

According to conquerpms.com, the following are a list of questions to ask yourself, or if you're a man, to confirm that your girlfriend/wife is only "temporarily insane," and is suffering from PMS (the symptoms must be present from one to 12 days prior to the start of menstruation and must then

disappear during or following menstruation):

1. Do you suffer from mood swings only during this time frame?
2. Do you experience weight gain, swelling and bloating only during this time frame?
3. Do you experience cravings for sweets, dairy products including cheese, and, on occasion, alcohol only during this time?
4. Do you experience fatigue or dizziness only during this time frame?
5. Do you experience insomnia or confusion only during this time frame?
6. Do you suffer from depression only during this time frame?
7. Do you cry or experience sadness for no apparent reason during this time frame?
8. Are you prone to emotional outbursts and unfounded irritability only during this time?
9. Are you forgetful or clumsy only during this time frame?

Over 150 symptoms have been attributed to PMS and each woman experiences their own form of hell, and worse, some lucky women don't experience any of them. In fact, it's not known why some women have severe symptoms, some mild, while others have none. It's estimated that there are 40 million women suffering from PMS and more than five million require medical treatment for marked mood and behavioral changes. Symptoms vary from month to month, and there may even be symptom-free months, so you never know what you're going to be up against. The exact cause of PMS is not known.

It's generally believed that PMS, migraines and depression stem from neurochemical changes within the brain. Hormonal factors, such as estrogen levels, had not been appreciated until recent studies. We know the female hormone estrogen starts to rise after menstruation and peaks around mid-cycle (ovulation). It then rapidly drops only to slowly rise and then fall again in the time before menstruation. Estrogen holds fluid, and with increasing

estrogen comes fluid retention; many women report weight gains of five pounds during pre-menstruation.

Estrogen also has a central neurological effect—it can contribute to increased brain activity and even cause seizures.

Estrogen can also contribute to retention of salt and a drop in blood sugar. PMS patients and those suffering from migraines both benefit from salt and sugar restrictions and a mild diuretic.

An herb formulated by a doctor, called maca, is supposed to help, and was first grown as a crop about 2,000 years ago, but may have been gathered as far back as 1600 B.C. and used by Incan women to help with menstrual symptoms as well as fertility and libido issues. Apparently, they used maca to maintain their livestock's breeding capabilities at high altitudes.

According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), there are several ways to treat PMS, including psychiatric medications: tricyclics (Elavil, Triavil and Sinequan); tranquilizers (Valium, Ativan and Xanax); and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors. There have been many documented studies showing the benefit to the patient in taking these medications for severe PMS. However, these medications have side effects and don't address the underlying hormonal causes. They're more like Band-Aids.

Many of us have had our doctors recommend we use the birth-control pill as a form of balancing our estrogen levels to combat the symptoms in addition to providing contraception. Personally, I worry that the long-term effect is still unknown. The recent recall of estrogen in hormone replacement therapy is an example. Natural forms of estrogen and progesterone are available and may be a better alternative.

NIH recommends regular exercise three to five times per week and a balanced



diet (with increased whole grains, vegetables and fruit, and decreased or no salt, sugar, alcohol and caffeine to reduce bloating, fatigue, tension and depression). Other suggestions are to eat six small meals at regular three-hour intervals, high in complex carbohydrates and low in simple sugars. This helps to maintain a steady blood glucose level and avoid energy highs and lows. Daily supplemental vitamins and minerals may also be administered to relieve some PMS symptoms. A multivitamin with B-6, B complex, magnesium, vitamin E and vitamin C may help alleviate irritability, fluid retention, joint aches, breast tenderness, anxiety, depression and fatigue. Be sure to check with your doctor before taking any medication for PMS.

Exercise is helpful for PMS because it reduces stress and tension, acts as a mood elevator, provides a sense of well being and improves blood circulation by increasing natural production of beta-endorphins. It is recommended, if your physician so advises, to exercise at least three times weekly for 20 to 30 minutes. Aerobics, walking, jogging, bicycling and swimming are a few of the suggested ways. The body may have different sleep requirements at different times during a woman's menstrual cycle, so it's also very important to obtain adequate rest.

I haven't tried the maca formula yet, but when I called to order it, deep in the throes of PMS and begging for help, the rep claimed this product was a tremendous seller and that women, herself included, have benefited from taking it. Nothing sells pills like desperation. ●