

Nutrition and the menstruation cycle

Certain nutrients found in foods can help reduce or manage some of the symptoms you might feel during your menstruation cycle. Below are the ones that help the most and what foods they are in.

Iron

During your period you can lose anywhere between 50 to 80 ml of blood. Iron is an essential element for blood production and often we don't get enough iron from our diet and so it can be low or we even end up being anemic.

If you are low in iron you can feel fatigued, weak, have dizziness, shortness of breath, chest pain, pale skin, or have cold hands and feet. Paradoxically if you are very low in iron and become anemic you end up with heavier periods which in turn make you lose more blood and you become more anemic!

As well as blood rebuilding iron is also part of oxygen transport and energy production so it is very important that you have good iron stores in your body.

There are two types of iron that you can get from food, heme and non-heme:

Heme comes from animal products like beef, lamb, chicken, mussels, oysters, canned sardines. It is the form of iron that is most readily absorbed by your body.

Non-heme iron comes from plant-based sources and can be used by the body but you need to eat a lot more of it to get the same amount of iron. The top foods are soybeans/tofu, lentils, beans, seeds - especially pumpkin, sesame, flaxseed and hemp, nuts, especially almond, pine nuts and cashews, leafy greens; spinach, kale, silver beet, microgreens rocket, tomato paste, (as it is concentrated it offers a higher amount), potatoes, especially the skins, mushrooms, prune juice, olives, whole grains, molasses, and dark chocolate.

Apart from the last two, these foods also contain good amounts of fiber, protein, vitamins and minerals and contain Vitamin C with them helps to increase iron absorption.

*If you are worried you might have low iron you can get a 'full blood count' blood test, just make sure B12 and ferritin are tested as well. If your iron count is below 30 you will need to use supplements as well as diet to get your iron levels up.

Magnesium

Most females don't get enough magnesium in their diet and if you are exercising you are also losing it through your sweat.

Magnesium deficiency increases the contractility of the smooth muscle in the uterus and the level of prostaglandins which are inflammatory compounds that contribute to period pain and cramping.

Magnesium also calms the nervous system so it is good for headaches and mood symptoms of PMS. It also promotes healthy excretion of estrogen.

Dietary sources of magnesium are dark green leafy greens, nuts, seeds, legumes, avocado, tofu, whole grains, salmon, bananas, and the best one - dark chocolate!

If you are exercising more than twice a week I would recommend supplementation of magnesium as it is involved in over 300 enzymatic actions in the body so we use up a lot in our day to day lives. If taken at night before bed it also helps to drop the body into a deeper more restful sleep.

Fiber

Again, most of us don't eat enough fiber and it really helps with PMS symptoms.

Fiber binds up any excess estrogen, and takes it to the bowel where it can be excreted, if not absorbed it can get reabsorbed into your bloodstream and organs affecting your hormone levels causing PMS symptoms. A low fiber diet can also contribute to constipation which causes the body to reabsorb some of the estrogen that has been broken down and detoxified by the liver, so it gets recycled back into the body leading to even higher levels of estrogen.

Food sources of fiber are green leafy plants, beans, legumes, nuts, seeds, brown rice, pop corn, nuts, baked potato with skin on, berries, bran cereal, oats, kiwi fruit, apples, and crunchy vegetables.

Vitamin B6

B6 supports healthy progesterone levels and is involved in the production of neurotransmitters, both which can help with mood swings before your period.

Food sources are red meat, chicken, dark leafy greens, carrots, sweet potato, lentils, chickpeas, oats, salmon and walnuts.

Zinc

Zinc is required for the proper action of many body hormones, it is important for supporting ovulation and progesterone production. Low levels have been correlated with PMS symptoms and acne.

Food sources are red meat, pumpkin, sunflower and sesame seeds, egg yolks, ginger, seafood and dairy foods.

Evening primrose oil

Evening primrose oil comes from the seeds of a plant that contain the essential fatty acid GLA (gamma-linolenic acid). We all need GLA as it is a key element in the production of prostaglandins which play an important role in hormone regulation. Prostaglandins regulate the female reproductive system and are involved in the control of ovulation and the menstrual cycle. Because EPO helps with hormonal regulation it can reduce the symptoms of PMS. It also helps with the treatment of skin disorders including acne, and improves the skin's elasticity.

This is taken as a supplement, 2 capsules a day after breakfast.

You may have noticed a lot of the nutrients are found in the same foods, that being red meat, green leafy salads, legumes, nuts, seeds and dark chocolate! So enjoy!