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What You Eat Could Contribute to Your Menstrual Cramps

New research project suggests that diets high in meat, oil, sugar, salt, and coffee contribute to menstrual pain

CLEVELAND, Ohio (October 12, 2022)—Despite the fact that menstrual pain (dysmenorrhea) is the leading cause of school absences for adolescent girls, few girls seek treatment. An analysis of relevant studies suggests that diet may be a key contributor, specifically diets high in meat, oil, sugar, salt, and coffee, which have been shown to cause inflammation. Results will be presented during The North American Menopause Society (NAMS) Annual Meeting in Atlanta, October 12-15, 2022.

Roughly 90% of adolescent girls experience menstrual pain. Most use over-the-counter medicine to manage the pain but with limited positive results. Evidence has highlighted that diets high in omega-3 fatty acids and low in processed foods, oil, and sugar reduce inflammation, a key contributor to menstrual pain.

This analysis was designed to study the effect of diet on menstrual pain and identify which foods contribute to it and which can reduce it. Research was conducted through a literature review that found multiple studies that examined dietary patterns that resulted in menstrual pain. In general terms, these studies found that diets high in omega-6 fatty acids promote inflammation and foods high in omega-3 fatty acids reduce it. The muscles in the uterus contract because of prostaglandins, which are active in inflammatory responses. When measuring the Dietary Inflammatory Index, it was found that those on a vegan diet (that excluded animal fat) had the lowest rates of inflammation.

“Researching the effects of diet on menstrual pain started as a search to remedy the pain I personally experienced; I wanted to understand the science behind the association. Learning about different foods that increase and decrease inflammation, which subsequently increase or reduce menstrual pain, revealed that diet is one of the many contributors to health outcomes that is often overlooked. I am hopeful that this research can help those who menstruate reduce the pain they experience and shed light on the importance of holistic treatment options,” says Serah Sannoh, lead author of the poster presentation from Rutgers University.

“Since menstrual pain is a leading cause of school absenteeism for adolescent girls, it’s important to explore options that can minimize the pain. Something like diet modification could be a relatively simple solution that could provide substantial relief for them,” said Dr. Stephanie Faubion, NAMS medical director.

Dr. Faubion and Ms. Sannoh are available for interviews before the presentation at the Annual Meeting.

Founded in 1989, The North American Menopause Society (NAMS) is North America's leading nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting the health and quality of life of all women during midlife and beyond through an understanding of menopause and healthy aging. Its multidisciplinary membership of 2,000 leaders in the field—including clinical and basic science experts from medicine, nursing, sociology, psychology, nutrition, anthropology, epidemiology, pharmacy, and education—makes NAMS uniquely qualified to serve as the definitive resource for health professionals and the public for accurate, unbiased information about menopause and healthy aging. To learn more about NAMS, visit www.menopause.org.