

# Dysmenorrhea and Chinese Medicine

## What is dysmenorrhea? Who suffers from dysmenorrhea, and how does it affect them?

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists reports that more than one half of menstruating women suffer from some degree of pain during menstruation.<sup>1</sup> **Dysmenorrhea**, or painful menstruation, is the most common gynecological problem among menstruating women,<sup>1,2</sup> and despite causing significant physical and psychological distress, is often underreported, underdiagnosed, and left untreated.<sup>3,4</sup>

Primary dysmenorrhea occurs in the absence of detectable pelvic pathology and often begins during menstruation in adolescence, while secondary dysmenorrhea is associated with other gynecological pathology such as uterine fibroids or endometriosis.<sup>1,4</sup>

Women with dysmenorrhea report cramping pain in the low abdomen, often at the onset of menstruation, which can be accompanied by low back pain, body ache, headache, nausea, and if severe even fainting. One study of university students found that 84.1% of the women surveyed reported ever experiencing painful menstruation, with 43.1% of those women experiencing pain during every menstrual cycle; 55.2% of the women needed medication to manage their pain symptoms, and 40.2% reported that their school performance was negatively affected.<sup>5</sup> Dysmenorrhea is the primary reason in the United States that teenage girls and college aged women are missing school.<sup>6,7</sup> One study of high school students found up to 38% reporting they missed school due to dysmenorrhea. Fifty-nine percent of those girls report a negative impact on their ability to concentrate in class, with 29% noticing their grades suffer because of it. High school girls are also reporting that dysmenorrhea interferes with their ability to socialize, participate in sports, and engage in the classroom.<sup>6,8</sup> Some reports estimate that up to one half of women who experience primary dysmenorrhea miss at least one day of work or school every menstrual cycle!<sup>9</sup>

## What are the current medical treatments for dysmenorrhea?

Analgesics such as aspirin and non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs) like ibuprofen are the standard treatment aimed at reducing pain during menstruation, and the use of hormonal birth control to manage dysmenorrhea is also common.<sup>8,10,11</sup> However, there are well documented cardiovascular, renal, and gastrointestinal risks associated with regular NSAID use, and it is estimated that each year in the U.S. over 100,000 people are hospitalized due to complications from NSAID use.<sup>12,13</sup> There are fewer risks associated with acupuncture than with the use of commonly prescribed and over-the-counter medications.<sup>14</sup>

## What are the Chinese medicine treatment options? Does acupuncture work?

Acupuncture has been found to be a cost-effective approach to the treatment of primary dysmenorrhea,<sup>15,16</sup> with several studies indicating SP6, or Sanyinjiao acupoint to be clinically significant in reducing the severity of symptoms associated with painful menstruation.<sup>17-19</sup> A comprehensive analysis of the literature found that along with Sanyinjiao acupoint, Guanyuan CV4 acupoint and Qihai CV6 acupoint are the most commonly used points in modern acupuncture treatment for dysmenorrhea.<sup>20</sup> Modern acupuncture point prescriptions, or protocols, are selected based on the traditional principles of Chinese medicine theory and practice. In a study of 649 women with dysmenorrhea, those who received a course of 15 acupuncture treatments over three consecutive months reported experiencing significant reduction in the severity of pain as well as an improved quality of life. This study was even funded by several prominent health insurance companies!<sup>2</sup>

## Are acupuncture and moxibustion safe?

Acupuncture and moxibustion performed by professionally trained and licensed acupuncturists is very safe!<sup>21,22</sup> Sterile, one-use acupuncture needles are categorized as class II medical devices, which are regulated by the Food and Drug Administration, and in the state of Oregon,<sup>23</sup> acupuncture licenses are regulated by the Oregon Medical Board.

The National Institute of Health recognizes the benefits of acupuncture within a conventional medicine paradigm, and research shows that there are few adverse side effects from acupuncture and moxibustion when performed by professionally trained and licensed acupuncturists. Slight bruising or bleeding, sensations of pressure or slight discomfort, experience of dizziness or lightheadedness are the most common reported adverse side effects of acupuncture, which can be minimized with rigorous training, patient education, and open communication between patient and practitioner.<sup>24</sup> When performing moxibustion, salves and creams are used as a protective barrier on the skin to minimize any risk of burns. Skilled technique developed through rigorous training ensures patient safety.<sup>25,26</sup>

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