



Patient information: Painful periods (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

Why are my periods so painful? — During your period, your body makes chemicals called “prostaglandins.” These chemicals cause the uterus to contract or tighten. It’s the same kind of contraction that happens during labor and childbirth. Contractions during a period are normal. But, they can be painful. The medical name for painful periods is “dysmenorrhea.”

Some medical conditions can make the pain during your period worse. The most common one is called “endometriosis.” In this condition, tissues that should grow only in the uterus grow outside the uterus.

What do painful periods feel like? — Women with painful periods have cramping in the lower belly. The cramps may be mild or bad. You might also have pain in your back or thighs. Pain often starts with your period or right before your period.

Some women also have:

- Nausea
- Diarrhea
- Extreme tiredness
- Headache
- Bloating (a feeling of fullness in the belly)

Is there anything I can do on my own to feel better? — Yes. You can:

- Take pain medicines such as [ibuprofen](#) (sold as Motrin® or Advil®) and [naproxen](#) (sold as Aleve®). Start taking them as soon as symptoms of your period begin. Keep taking them for 2 or 3 days.
- Put a heating pad or hot water bottle on your lower belly
- Exercise on a regular basis

Should I see a doctor or nurse? — See your doctor or nurse if:

- The pain is getting worse
- Pain medicine isn’t helping
- You also have pain well before or well after your period

Are there tests I should have? — Your doctor or nurse will decide which tests you should have based on your age, other symptoms, and individual situation.

Most women need only a physical exam. In the exam, your doctor will check the size and shape of your vagina, cervix, uterus, and ovaries ([figure 1](#)). If the exam isn’t normal or pain medicine doesn’t help, your doctor might do other tests. These include:

- Pelvic ultrasound – This test uses sound waves to make a picture of your uterus, ovaries, and vagina to see if they look normal.
- Tests for infections that you catch during sex

- Laparoscopy – This is a type of surgery. The doctor will put you to sleep and make a small cut just below your belly button. Then, he or she will use a thin tool with a camera on it to see inside your belly.

How are painful periods treated? — That depends on what is causing your painful periods. The most common treatments are:

- Pain medicines
- Birth control pills or other types of birth control that involve hormones

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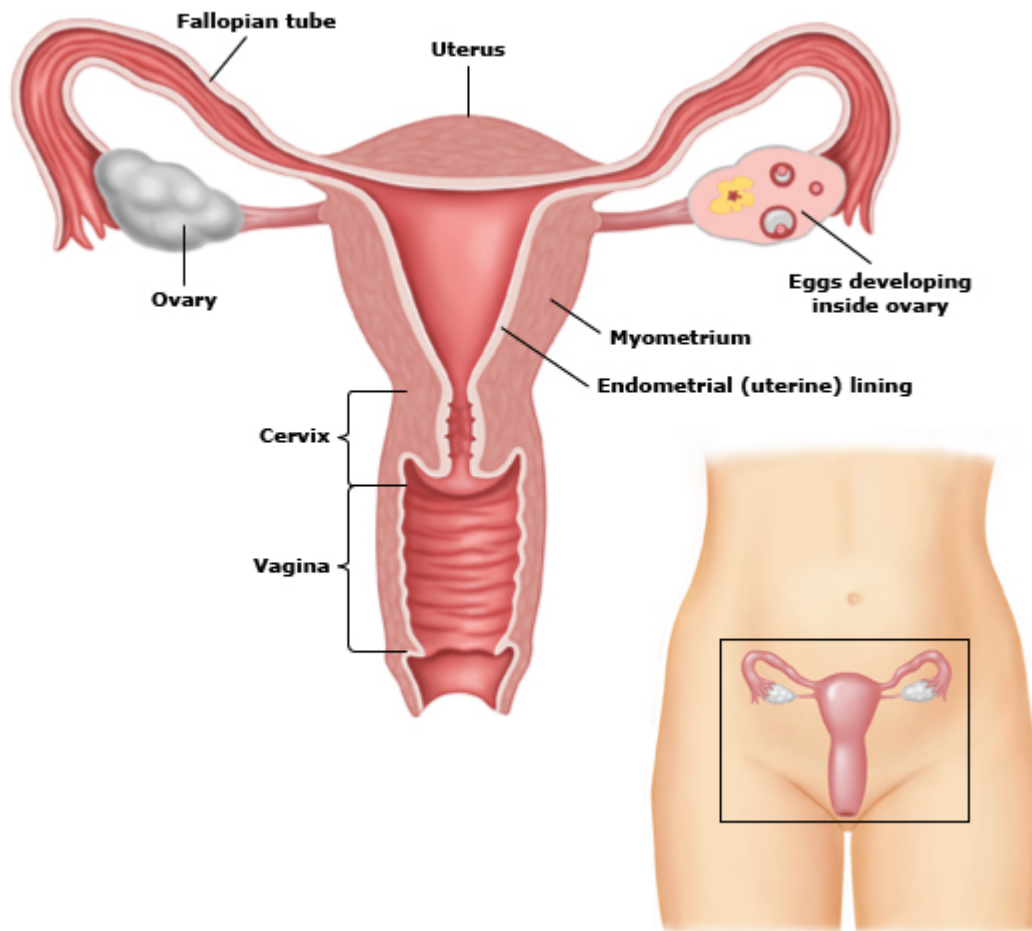
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GRAPHICS

Female reproductive anatomy



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