



## Acupuncturist Diaries 2: “The Monthly Terror”

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If you menstruate, you may know the monthly terror: the abdominal cramps, headaches, and digestive problems that seem hopeless without painkillers. Some may even suffer from heart palpitations and fever on the first days of their menstrual cycle. In consideration with other potential difficulties such as PCOS, it is no surprise that many people come to loathe or even fear their “time of the month.”

From puberty until menopause, an individual undergoes approximately 420 total menstrual cycles in their lifetime. The menstruating years have come to symbolize not only one’s window of fertility, but the “golden years” of youth itself. But when PMS symptoms become so painful that they interfere with everyday activities, the so-called blessing of fertility can feel more like a cruel joke.

Studies show that over 50% of people who menstruate suffer from menstrual symptoms each month. Modern Western medicine tends to treat these “symptoms” superficially, chalking up the “root cause” of the pain to be menstruation itself. In Eastern medicine, on the other hand, the research on targeting menstrual pain is both expansive and highly structured.

Menstrual pain is attributed to a handful of key factors:

1. Cold Energy: A concentrated presence of cold energy in the body, identifiable by a cold lower stomach and aching in the hips and back, worsens menstrual pain. Fortunately, cold energy can be easily combatted with heat sources such as heating pads or warm foods. Ice cream, though delicious, must be avoided when dealing with menstrual pain.
2. Stagnated blood: The uterine lining is essentially stagnated, uncirculated energy. If you typically experience back pain or see clumps in your period blood, it may often indicate heavier periods and greater cramping.
3. Poor mental or emotional health: Stress and anxiety are blockages to the body’s natural circulation of blood and *qi* (energy). When circulation to and from the uterus is blocked, the process of “blood flow” itself becomes more difficult and painful. Gassiness of the stomach, breast pain, and dark, clumpy periods may indicate such an internal blockage.

4. General weakness: If you've recently undergone physical trauma, or if your body is not properly nourished, the flow of blood is weakened and may lead to more prolonged and painful periods. A "pulling" pain during your period may be an indicator of such physical weakness.

Menstrual pain can affect the majority of the torso, from nausea in the upper stomach to aching in the lower spine and pelvic region. If pain arises before or during the onset of one's period, it is classified as "excessive." If pain arises immediately after the end of one's period, it is classified as "deficient." If warmth alleviates the pain, it is due to cold energy. If warmth makes the pain worse, it is due to excessive heat in the body. Intense, "stabbing" pain is attributed to excessive heat, while tense, "pulling" pain is attributed to cold energy.

Pain may also be attributed to anatomical factors, such as a uterus that is naturally bent towards the back. In order to identify the underlying cause of one's menstrual symptoms, it is crucial to know the timeframe of when symptoms arise, as well as the location and "type" of pain.

For people with mild symptoms each month, hot packs and light exercise for circulation should be effective modes of combatting menstrual pain. Making everyday dietary adjustments, such as **consuming less pork, cold drinks, or intense flavors**, can prevent pain as well.

However, periods can be mentally and physically draining for those who experience intense pain month after month, trying to get by with painkillers. In such cases, we encourage our patients to seek balance in their bodily energy through acupuncture and herbal medicine.