

askST: Should I see the doctor if I have severe period pains?



A painful period could be a warning sign of underlying medical conditions. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO



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PUBLISHED SEP 27, 2022, 1:28 PM SGT

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SINGAPORE – Some women might choose to grit their teeth through a painful period, but this could be a warning sign of underlying medical conditions.

One such disease is endometriosis, which affects one in 10 females in their childbearing years. The late award-winning British novelist Hilary Mantel was afflicted by the condition's debilitating pain for most of her life.

Doctors told The Straits Times that many women in Singapore tend to delay medical attention because they believe that suffering from serious menstrual pain is normal.

They address some common misconceptions and questions about period pain.

Q: Should I be concerned about severe pain during my period?

A: Severe pain is a common symptom of endometriosis, a chronic condition in which tissues resembling the lining of the womb grow in other organs, including the ovaries, bowels and even the lungs and nose. If left untreated, the growths can spread, result in organ dysfunction and increase the risk of cancer.

Apart from increasing menstrual pain, the condition can also lead to pain in the pelvis as well as pain during sex or bowel movements, said Dr Samantha Yeo, an associate consultant from the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at KK Women's and Children's Hospital.

Some 40 to 50 per cent of sufferers also have difficulty conceiving.

The most common barrier to seeking help for endometriosis is the misconception that it is normal to suffer from period pain, said Dr Yeo.

"In Singapore especially, we notice that many young women are hesitant to discuss menstrual concerns openly. Delays in accessing treatment can result in unnecessary suffering and disease progression," she added.

Q: How do I know if my menstrual pains are serious enough?

A: Women should get medical help when the severity of period pain becomes hard to tolerate or there is a gradual increase in the degree or duration of pain, said Dr Beh Suan Tiong, a consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist at SOG – Beh Clinic For Women at Thomson Medical Centre.

The need to adjust work or lifestyle arrangements when there is menstrual pain may also indicate underlying gynaecological diseases, he added.

Dr Chen Lin, anchor doctor at Doctor Anywhere, said women can use this online assessment tool (<https://str.sg/wreg>) to identify symptoms, but should still consult a doctor if they are unwell.

“Earlier treatment usually has a better outcome,” he added.

Q: What forms of treatment are available for endometriosis?

A: Medical treatments can help ease symptoms and commonly include painkillers as well as hormonal treatments, said Dr Yeo.

Surgery may be offered to patients who have significant pain or large ovarian cysts, or together with fertility treatment, she added.